

Starkin

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Rebecca W. Miller
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Abstract

In traditional fantasy novels, as established with J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, the main character embarks on a heroic journey. As defined by Joseph Campbell, who was the author, editor and translator of books on mythology such as *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* a heroic journey is an epic quest that leads the hero physically to an internal rebirth. Within Campbell's study of the monomyth, using those conventions outlined by Campbell, I will show how Tolkien elements uses Campbell's conventions in Middle Earth, where a simple young hobbit ends up saving his world. In traditional fantasy, the stories most often follow patterns of myth very closely. An average human becomes a larger-than life hero by surviving a series of deadly challenges set against him by fellow humans or by God-like enemies. Two more recent fantasy novels, McKillip's *The Changeling Sea* and Sagara's *Cast in Shadow*, also use the monomyth as the frame for their novels. However, the two more recent novels focus more on the internal journey of their heroines. These two novels reflect a trend in fantasy novels in which the internal journey is privileged over the outer physical journey. These two novels are examples of modern fantasy's reinterpretation of the traditional monomyth which promises larger than life adventures and heroes. Modern fantasy novels often establish a more subdued realm of adventure and escape. With the hero's role minimized, the fantasy hero's journey takes on other dimensions in relation to Campbell's discussion of modern literature. Though as writers, including myself, break off from tradition and attempt to draw the fantastical journey of characters into literary realms of self-study, it is imperative that due be given to the roots of myth, which continue to support the frame of monomyths and the heroic journey.

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Introduction

In traditional fantasy novels, as established with J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, the main character embarks on a heroic journey. As defined by Joseph Campbell, author, editor, and translator of books on mythology such as *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, a heroic journey is an epic quest that leads the hero physically to an internal rebirth. Within his study of the monomyth, Campbell dissects the form and function of a myth to discover the importance of the journey itself in relation to, and perhaps in spite of, the hero. In discussing the parts of the hero's quest necessary for a successful heroic journey, Campbell states that "the standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation-initiation-return*: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth" (Campbell 30). Campbell's formula for the monomyth is the outline for a heroic journey, which both mythological and literary heroes must face in order to successfully complete their quests, whether they are physical or psychological. However, several modern fantasy writers such as Patricia A. McKillip and Michelle Sagara are keeping their heroes on a tighter leash, forcing the transformation to become an even more intensely internal experience for the hero or heroine.

Using those conventions outlined by Campbell, I will show how Tolkien elements use Campbell's conventions in Middle Earth, where a simple young hobbit ends up saving his world. However, to first understand the monomyth as a guiding principal in traditional and contemporary fantasy novels, one must turn to the fairy tale and its own preoccupation with myth. Campbell notes that "It is the business of mythology proper, and of the fairy tale, to reveal the specific dangers and techniques of the dark interior way

from tragedy to comedy. Hence the incidents are fantastic and ‘unreal.’ They represent psychological, not physical, triumphs” (Campbell 51). Fantasy’s connection to the fairy tale relegates the stories and many if not all of the authors, in some minds, to the sphere of entertainment (genre) rather than literary fiction. However, Campbell says the fact that fantasy is “unreal” makes the overall action and story more apt to be an inner revelation both for the character and the reader (51). Other scholars such as George Aichele in his “Literary Fantasy and Postmodern Theology” discuss the role of fantasy in modern theory as being a form of literature that is “non-real, to which non-belief is the appropriate response” (Aichele 323). In other words, readers should approach a fantastical piece of writing with suspension of disbelief so they can be drawn into the world and the story without being caught by the unlikely elements, usually magical in nature, involved in the hero’s journey.

In traditional fantasy, the stories most often follow patterns of myth very closely. An average human becomes a larger-than life hero by surviving a series of deadly challenges set against him or her by fellow humans or by God-like enemies. J.R.R. Tolkien as the forerunner for fantasy is perhaps the best example of this monomythical pattern. Tolkien’s series *The Lord of the Rings* introduces the hobbit Frodo Baggins as the only person who can save his world from the evil lord Sauron by destroying the ring of power. The first stage of any hero’s journey, according to Campbell, is the separation or departure from the hero’s past life. Whether the hero is a popular person in his old life or an outcast, the “call to adventure” is usually too strong to resist. The hero is compelled to start his journey despite all reservations and fears. In the case of young Frodo, Gandolph’s warnings of the danger to the Shire are the spurring force behind his first

steps along the path that will eventually culminate on Mount Doom. Campbell says the hero must cross the first threshold where “the adventure is always and everywhere a passage beyond the veil of the known into the unknown” (Campbell 82). For Frodo starting out on his journey, there is no end in sight; one step leads to another as inevitably as the weather changes so that he no longer knows what his next step will be until he is impelled to take it.

Campbell compares the hero’s journey to a form of suicide, in that the hero embarks on his trek with an unconscious understanding that he will be transformed beyond recognition by the end, entering a type of rebirth. Campbell says “once having traversed, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials” (91). Frodo’s trials range in seriousness from the stabbing at Weathertop to the decision to bear the ring to be destroyed. He must survive the multitude of challenges that face him between the beginnings of his journey to the return home. During the “initiation” stage of a heroic journey, the hero must not only survive these challenges, he must also conquer his fears. After the quest is completed, for Frodo it meant destroying the ring of power, and then the hero can “return” to the past life. However, the change is not always as smooth as the hero might wish. Campbell says it is often the case that after spending all his energy and motivation in completing his task, “the hero may have to be brought back from his supernatural adventure by assistance from without. That is to say, the world may have to come and get him” (207). Even as Frodo is rescued by the Eagles and brought back to his world, the changes in him are substantial. In fact, Frodo has evolved so far through his experiences

that he feels he is no longer able to stay a part of his old life or even his world, deciding to eventually leave Middle Earth with the elves.

Throughout Tolkien's series, Frodo's monomyth is fraught with physical challenges that lead to his internal metamorphosis. Campbell states that "the passage of the mythological hero may be over-ground incidentally; fundamentally it is inward into depths where obscure resistances are overcome, and long lost, forgotten powers are revived, to be available for the transfiguration of the world" (29). However, many readers will privilege the physical challenges over the internal changes because they dominate the plot. In modern fantasy novels, some authors de-emphasize the physical journey of the monomyth in order to emphasize the hero's internal quest and transformation. Two more recent fantasy novels, McKillip's *The Changeling Sea* and Sagara's *Cast in Shadow*, also use the monomyth as the frame for their novels. However, the two focus more on the internal journey of their heroines. These two novels reflect a trend in fantasy novels in which the internal journey is privileged over the outer physical journey. For instance, Sagara's *Elantra* series begins with the novel *Cast in Shadow*, which focuses on the heroic journey of the young heroine Kaylin Neya. In Sagara's novel, Kaylin is a young woman whose past is shrouded with hunger, fear, and death. She is able to free herself of the fetters of her old life and join an elite group of justice keepers known as Hawks. Her new name and life is about upholding justice in her city. For one who used to steal routinely to survive, it is quite a change of pace; however, she enters her new role without any reminders of the old until she is forced into the presence of a childhood friend and now enemy, Severn, who reminds her of everything she could wish to forget. For Kaylin, this is when her heroic journey begins, and though throughout the

novel, there is a fair amount of fighting and magical wonderment; the entire breadth of the adventure never leaves the walls of her city.

Kaylin has been given the call to adventure that “brings up the curtain, always, of spiritual passage, which, when complete amounts to a dying and a rebirth” (Campbell 51). Rather than being sent across the world to a mountain of fire, Kaylin plunges into her own fears, memories, and sorrows to either succumb to or move beyond her past. For Kaylin, her journey is about outgrowing “the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns [that] no longer fit” (Campbell 51). Her initiation into her adventure and onto her heroic journey is the moment when she accepts her past as part of herself and recognizes her future will require her to balance the two parts of past and present. The return for Kaylin is not a grand procession back to her home town, but simply a moment when she can look at herself as she was without flinching or making excuses.

Another writer who privileges the character’s inner journey over the outer one is Patricia A. McKillip. In McKillip’s short novel *The Changeling Sea*, Peri is a young girl who lost her father, a fisherman, to the sea. Fraught with grief, Peri chooses to cultivate her hatred for the sea. The dread of loss and losing is the demon that must be defeated in Peri’s life. In a strange twist of fate, Peri is wrapped tightly in the sea’s magic, and meets a sea monster, who is actually a long lost prince, who forces Peri to embark on her own heroic journey. For Peri her introduction to adventure occurs through what Campbell would describe as a classic “blunder—apparently the merest chance—reveals an unsuspected world, and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood” (Campbell 51). Peri knows there is something strange about teaching a sea monster how to read and falling in love with a prince who is already in love with

the sea, but as is the case with many heroes in monomyths, she must finish following the path she's been given. In comparison to *Cast in Shadow*, McKillip's novel is even more internal and contained, since the action occurs within one small fishing village. As her friendship with the sea prince intensifies, Peri forges her path through the chaos of the world. In Peri's case, it could be argued that the chaos actually forges her, because the sea world brings her back from despair and teaches her to trust again. Campbell says

The hero adventures out of the land we know into darkness; there he accomplishes his adventure, or again is simply lost to us, imprisoned, or in danger and his return is described as a coming back out of that yonder zone: nevertheless—and here is a great key to the understanding of myth and symbol—the two kingdoms are actually one. (Campbell 217)

Realizing the world where she lost her father is also the world offering her a chance to make new friends, to be close to her mother, and perhaps someday fall in love is the moment of change for Peri. These realizations about nature are the final revelations at the end of her particular journey. Her ability to accept personal loss as part of the natural cycle of life is the equivalent of Bilbo's reaching the top of Mount Doom. Whereas, Bilbo returns to his old life famous and rich and Kaylin returns to her role as a Hawk no longer burdened with the guilt and fear of her past, Peri returns simply to life, coming back from that "yonder zone" with a better understanding of herself and nature.

These two novels are examples of modern fantasy's reinterpretation of the traditional monomyth, which promises larger than life adventures and heroes. Modern fantasy novels often establish a more subdued realm of adventure and escape. The dangers in such realms are just as deadly for the heroes as they were on the pages of

Tolkien, but the journey is closer to home. The heroes must face not only their current personal challenges, but also their family and friends. By keeping the hero close to home, modern fantasy writers redefine the traditional battlefield, and as a result the journey for the hero and for the reader. Campbell describes the battlefield as “symbolic of the field of life, where every creature lives on the death of another. The goal of the myth is to dispel the need for such life ignorance by effecting a reconciliation of the individual consciousness with the universal will” (Campbell 238). In other words, the battlefield is where the characters realize their own journey is no more or less important than anyone else’s, despite the usually perilous results should they fail the tasks they have been set. A hero is mortal, and just as vulnerable to the many failures of mankind as any other person. With the hero’s role minimized, the fantasy hero’s journey takes on other dimensions in relation to Campbell’s discussion of modern literature. Campbell feels that “Modern literature is devoted in great measure to a courageous, open-eyed observation of the sickeningly broken figurations that abound before us, around us and within” (27). For Campbell, modern literature focuses on what it means to be human without the intervention of a godlike savior. In this vision, Campbell states, that the protagonists are left to face not only their own inner struggles, but also both the horrific and beautiful natures of man. Modern fantasy novels tend to focus more on this aspect of myth compared to traditional fantasy which incorporates the intervention of a godlike savior.

In my own novel, I hope to have unleashed the inner struggle of a strong female character like Kaylin and Peri while utilizing some of the fantastical elements of style and form that made Frodo’s journey so spectacular. Many authors in fantasy are moving to this closer inspection of the hero independent of a dazzling fireworks display of might

and magic that might distract readers from noticing the characters. Though as writers, including myself, break off from tradition and attempt to draw the fantastical journey of characters into literary realms of self-study, it is imperative that due be given to the roots of myth, which continue to support the frame of monomyths and the heroic journey.

Campbell says that

Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind. It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation.” (3)

These energies, when directed, into a piece of writing will undoubtedly produce something of note, a feeling or meaning, that the reader can take away from the novel.

My hopes are only to allow the reader the opportunity to find something in my character’s internal heroic journey for self identity that is worth taking away with them into their everyday lives.

Chapter 1

Satani didn't stumble, even when the guard shoved his small, hard fist between her shoulders and knuckled her forward into the tiny cell.

Instead, she pivoted to glare at the two blue-clad king's guards through the square barred window in the door. They shut it and there followed a thud as something was lowered to lock her in. She stood in the light cast by mage globes hovering over the two guards' heads as peacefully as motes of dust.

"Look at her," said the tallest guard, who had been the one to bind her thumbs together earlier in the day. "She looks like she wants to kill you with her teeth. Demon that she is, maybe she could."

The other guard, shorter, but harder of body and swifter of mind cleared his throat. His brow was drawn together in furrows deep enough to grow corn.

"You'd think today would have driven even the most tenacious demons out of her," the guard muttered.

Satani picked up faint traces of an Iential accent, which meant he had come down far in life since birth.

"Ah, leave it be," he said and dropped down out of sight of the window. The other guard stayed for a few more blinks of those wide, smug eyes, grinning through the bars before turning away.

"Maybe another day in the square will do the trick," he said as he walked away from the door. their boots scraped as they walked around the corner, then clicked

and thudded up the stone steps leading to the more serviceable areas of the guard post.

The short one grunted and they climbed past her hearing, taking the mage globes with them, plunging everything into night. Satani stood still, listening intently for movements in any of the other cells next to her, but there was only silence. She was alone.

Satani's nose was assaulted by the dust filling the cell; it puffed up around her when she moved. She didn't sneeze, but her eyes stung and watered. She mused that she was probably the first resident this room had seen since the cloth guild uprising last winter. In this part of the city, there were few who would dare cause trouble and those who did were often handled in shadowed corners out of sight of the guards. By the time she had taken a steadying deep breath, her vision had already switched from daylight to night. She could see as easily in the gray, blue, and black of the nighttime world. She thought it might be a little easier to work at night, when there were no bright colors to distract her. Her night vision was unparalleled by any others in the guild besides perhaps the guild master's.

Now that she knew she was alone, Satani studied her prison. It was more a box than a prison, there was barely enough room for her to lie down had she wanted to. There was no window, only solid stonewalls and a floor covered in urine-caked hay.

She didn't try to suppress her smile, nor did she waste any time, slithering a needle thin knife blade from her tunic cuff, not an easy task with her thumbs still bound together. She used the blade, which no matter how delicately she held it between her fingers drew blood, to slice through her bonds. Careful to keep hold of

the tiny tool, Satani brought her hands in front of her. She slipped the blade back in its cloth sheath and wiped the blood from her fingers on what had been a green tunic before today. She spent a few precious moments rubbing the life back into the thumbs.

Her day spent bound to the pole in the market square had left more than its fair share of mud, rotten food, and blood stains on her clothes. So, one more stain was hardly a sacrifice. Still rubbing her thumbs, she slowly circled to study the room more closely while trying not to think about how many hours she had been bound. The pain in her hands made that more difficult, but she managed. Finally, after she had counted to two hundred, she had regained the movement of all her fingers and, she figured she had given the guards enough time to get out of her path.

She stepped up to the wooden door. Her bare feet made no sound on the hardened clay. She stood under the window, listening again, just in case something might have missed her attention earlier. Nothing.

Satani pushed against the door, but the bar was solid and the door didn't budge. Normally, even such a well-made barrier would have been no trouble, but this guard-post had three of the king's mages stationed there. Using magic would have been akin to screeching in their ears that she was about to escape.

"No more wasting time," she whispered. She dug her hand inside the front of her tunic and carefully pulled out a wad of string she had tucked under her breasts. That was one plus of being considered a demon; few of the guards thought about trying to press themselves on her, leaving plenty of hiding places.

She unraveled the rope, which was balled around a fishhook that had two sharp prongs the size of her thumb, the kind used by the river fishermen. The rope itself was also special, made of an elastic material that was supposedly unbreakable and had the faintest taint of magic about it.

She slid the hook, which was attached to the rope, between the bars of the window and let it slither down the length of the door until she felt it thump on top of the bar. By pressing her face against the bars she could just barely make out the bar below. The wooden bar rested in a simple U-shaped cradle without anything over top to keep it in place. Saying a quick thank you to whichever gods were watching out for her today, she pulled the slack off the rope so that the hook slid off the bar, and she let it fall below the edge before pulling back sharply. The prongs missed the edge of the wood, and she was forced to lower the hook again, all the while feeling sweat trickle down the back of her neck. When would they send the first round of guards to check on her?

“Goddess blind it,” she hissed as the hook missed the grain again. She took a deep breath and tried once more, jerking more forcefully. In response, the prongs dug deeply into the wood, and the rope tightened in her grip. Grinning, Satani pulled the rope with the weight of the surprisingly heavy log on the end. She lifted until it cleared the cradle. It was quick work then to tug the door open and step out into the dark hallway.

Satani shut the cell door behind her, resetting the bar back across it after pulling loose her hook. The hook would make a handy weapon, and she thought it better to leave the guards imagining how she’d managed to break free. She ignored the hallway to her right that led through a series of other cells. Instead, she jogged

quietly around the closest corner and up the stairs she had been dragged down only a few minutes before.

She'd used the few minutes it had taken the guards to sign in their prisoner and then show off their prize to their comrades as an opportunity to memorize the layout of the post. Halfway up the stairs there would be a door that led to more hallways that would branch out into the guards' barracks. Across from that was a door she had not seen open, but she knew it was the one she wanted to enter.

If she continued up she would come out onto the main floor, where the guards on duty checked in during their rounds for this part of the city. She had studied the barracks for days before her capture to make sure she felt comfortable with its layout from the outside. It was actually a building, the top floor was level with the ground, while the three sub floors dug down into the rocks overlooking the Ateran River. Her cell, if she was correctly orienting herself, faced the bedrock of the cliff, while the barracks and other rooms faced out toward the river.

As she reached the turn in the stairway that would reveal the first landing and the door she wanted, Satani slowed down. The grating of metal against metal and the thud and clap of footsteps on the stairs moving toward her caused a string of obscenities to thread through her thoughts. Apparently, it was later than she had assumed. The guards were changing their posts. These were probably coming down to the barracks for the night.

"You should have seen it; the inn keeper's face was nearly purple. I mean he looked like someone had thrown die on his face." The voice squeaked slightly over

the word face, but the accompanying laughs were deeper. A young guard with his peers.

“You should have seen him last Summer’s Eve when his wife decided she would redecorate the inn using some kind of polka-dotted upholstery from the cloth guild,” another voice muttered.

“Well, if he calls us out for any other personal matters instead of real emergencies, we may have to do some redecorating ourselves,” muttered a third .

They had stopped on the landing above her, and Satani, who was still around the corner out of sight, pressed against the wall. The light from mage globes didn’t quite reach her, but the guards were close enough to make her wish she could have woven a spell to bend all light away from herself . Then she could have walked in between them without their noticing.

“You’d better turn in,” the third voice said.

“I wanted to go downstairs and see the demon,” the younger guard protested. “Dag said she was the scariest thing he’s seen since the war. Ears that are this long and pointed! She’s got cat eyes too and the scars,”

“Yes, well scars or not, ears or not. She’s going to be here for a while and you have to be awake in four candle marks to accompany the next package train to the palace. Off to bed with you,” the older guard said. The youth might have protested again, but the second voice boomed,

“That’s an order, not a suggestion!”

She could hear the youth's heels strike the pavement as he dashed away, opening the door to the barracks and clattering through without shutting it behind him.

"Little maggot, he'll grow up to be a soldier yet," the second voice said.

"We'll see," the third one said. "You want to go down too, I suppose?"

"Well, yes, but I need some food first. I spent most of the day at the docks, and the only meat you can find there still has a rat tail attached."

Satani slipped up a few steps until she was only a few from being able to see around the curve in the wall. However, the guard's stomach rumbling would have been hard to miss had she been standing a dozen steps lower.

"You go ahead and find us some of that cheese Tad had yesterday. He owes me a favor after that incident with the cat. See if he's hiding any wine as well. Might as well make a night of it. We'll not be having much free time up until the ball."

"True enough," the second guard said, and then was trotting away murmuring about mutton and cheese.

The other guard had not moved that Satani could hear. Barely breathing, she crouched, keeping inside what few shadows were available on the staircase so close to the mage globes. She peered around the final curve of the stairs and saw the guard staring down at her. She froze, her breath fully stopped until she realized he wasn't staring at her, but past her. He was looking down the stairs toward the cells with an unreadable look on his face.

She still didn't take a breath until he shook himself, rubbing two fingers over a mustache that bristled like unruly paintbrushes on either side of his face. He turned away from the barracks door and toward the storage room entrance. He opened the door using a key at his waist and plucked the mage globe that had been attached to the wall with a kind of sticky magic down into his hand. Releasing it from his hand it hovered just over his head as he opened the door and slipped inside.

Satani couldn't let the opportunity pass. She threw herself up the last few steps and thrust an arm between the door and the jam so she wouldn't be locked out. Swiftly, she slipped inside, dropping immediately into a crouch just in case the guard was inside and would notice her presence, but he was already halfway into a room the size of the market square. Except, this room was filled with wares that would have even the most honest merchants contemplating how much they could shove under their coats before leaving. It was full of crates and barrels casting uneasy shadows across the walls, thanks to the guard's mage globe. There was a narrow path through the center of the room with a few smaller paths crossing it to create neat rows.

Still crouching in the shadows, Satani could hear the clamor of more guards clomping down the stairs. Slowly, she pushed the door shut. It made a faint click as it locked, but the guards' steps and voices covered the sound as they approached the landing. She turned back to the room to find the lone guard replacing a key chain on his belt and bending over a large crate. He pulled off a cloth cover on top, coughing at the dust he stirred up. He stood in the light of his mage globe, but his face was lit by the moonlight that angled in from the windows. Satani could hear the water below them as it lapped up against the cliff face and could smell the metallic scent that meant the mages had cleansed the water recently.

She kept her place next to a stack of upright barrels that smelled like beeswax. The Betwarn seal on the barrel made it expensive beeswax. More than likely the wax was to be taken to the palace where it would be formed into candles. Servants needed the primitive light sources after the mage globes were extinguished. A box to her right was imprinted with the sigil of a cloak maker, who was known for the most creative mix of magic and cloth in the realm. One of his cloaks was worth as much as any of the smaller boats in the king's harbor and that box could probably hold at least four of them.

"They told me you were good," the guard said, without turning from his search, "but I had my doubts, watching them trounce you so thoroughly this morning."

Satani had not expected him to notice her so soon, but stood and stepped into the mage globe's warm light.

"I didn't think you'd make it through the day," he said, running his gaze from her feet to the top of her head.

Satani said nothing. There was nothing to say. This guard had been in the guild's pocket for years. She'd seen him, but never worked with him directly. He was said to be sharp, both with his wits and his knives. However, Satani felt nothing but anticipation of a job nearly done. He would not dare disrupt her task here tonight.

"You have egg in your hair." The figure laughed, turning his face back to the crate in front of him. He had pried it open and was rooting through its contents. Satani didn't lift a hand to her hair, but she could feel it now, the yolk drying and

tangling her blond hair into a matted mess along with remnants of rotten tomato and even some cabbage.

“Where is it?” Satani asked and bit her lip when the question was sharper than she had intended. She was not a fool to be baited by mere words, but the day had worn at her.

“I saw you there today,” the figure said in answer, still rooting through the box, but tossing her a measuring look. “Did you know the guards would tie you up in the market when you said you’d take on this job?”

Satani studied the room, catching sight of barrels marked by Teryn wine makers and doing a few quick sums in her head to calculate how much the guild could sell those back to the merchants for. Anything in here would be valuable, but she had been sent for one specific item.

“How I got here isn’t important.” Satani was surprised she answered, but it had been a long day. She did want to be through with this particular mission as badly as she had wanted to have a knife in her hands when the market crowd had started pelting her .

“Yes, well,” the guard rubbed his mustache, but she couldn’t tell if it was a nervous movement or a measured one. “All I have to say is you’re tough. I saw where more than one of those rocks hit. Many would be lying in a heap---“

“I didn’t come here to chat,” Satani hissed, and she stepped forward. She could feel the light hit her eyes and new when the guard’s face drained of color a little that her eyes were reflecting the light back. It was an annoyance most of the time, but

sometimes it helped to at least put an opponent off balance. This guard didn't move back or look particularly scared, but he didn't look away either.

He nodded slowly and lifted a black wooden box from the crate he had been rummaging through. She was glad to see the item she'd been sent to retrieve was small enough to tuck under one arm. That made climbing onto rooftops easier.

"Here. The guard held the box out with one hand. There's a lot of swaddling inside, but it is still fragile."

Satani stepped forward, watching him carefully for any sudden movements and took it from his hands.

"You'll not want to drop it," he said, and once she had both hands grasping it firmly he lashed out with a fist.

Satani dropped under his swing, cradling the box to her chest as she swept a foot in a semi-circle that knocked his legs out from under him. He grunted and fell backward into the crate, with a thundering crash as thin wood splintered and crunched under his weight, a few items shattered shrilly in protest as well. She kicked him in the head and slammed a foot down into his ribs. She thought she could feel one or two crack, but he was too unconscious to care.

Shouts started rising in urgency from across the hallway. Her eyes darted as she searched for somewhere to hide. The mage light still hovered serenely. There wasn't anywhere she could go where the guards wouldn't be able to find her within minutes. She heard guards banging on the door as they yelled for their companion to answer. And she picked out two familiar voices, the quavering youth from before and his older companion.

The noise had made her task that much more difficult. She'd been hoping she could make it out the front door somehow. It would have been difficult without magic, but not impossible. She thought about using magic since she'd been discovered, but dismissed the idea. Gawin had given her the guild masters' orders, including the one forbidding her from magic yesterday. Only yesterday? It felt like a lot longer since she had been sent to pick the pocket of the captain of the guard with the expectation of getting caught.

There was only one place left to go really. Steeling herself, Satani climbed over the unconscious figure to the window. She threw open the casing and climbed up onto the windowsill, which was made of stone and was wide enough that she could crouch comfortably. The door shuddered as the guards, who apparently didn't have a key, attempted to knock it down.

Satani's breath caught as she looked down to the river water. The water shivered with moonlight as it flowed past her and the cliff on its way to the sea. She drew in a deep, steadying breath and slowly released her death grip on the wall where her fingernails were attempting to dig into the stone itself. She looked back over her shoulder, but there was no escape that way. The thudding at the door halted and she could feel the shivering presence of a mage on the other side of the door, felt his power coalesce.

Just as the door burst open with the aid of a powerful wind spell, Satani jumped out and down. As she plummeted over a dozen feet down to the surface, she wrapped her body around the box in a physical shield. When she hit the water, she felt as if she had been hit by a fast runaway carriage. Her lungs were knocked free of breath and her head was filled with sunbursts of pain.

She sank as the rivers current tangled itself in the cloth of her tunic, of her pants, grabbed her hair in a freezing fist and tumbled her down toward the depths of its darkness. The water slipped into her nostrils, through her gasping mouth, and into her lungs. Every night she dreamed of the river swallowing her whole before spitting her back out on the shores of the city, to wander alone and helpless. Now, here she was and the river really was swallowing her.

She'd learned how to swim because once the guild master knew she feared water, he was determined one of her first useful skills would be swimming. As she gagged on water, kicking feebly, pulling at the current with one hand, while her other wrapped around the precious box, those lessons seemed far away. Somehow she managed to break the surface of the river and drag in a mouthful of air before she was tugged back down. The current was tugging at her, trying to drag her out into the main current.

She fought the urge to scream and the voice that said she should simply let the box sink so she would have both hands free. She knew she had to get it back safely. The current had carried her farther down than she expected, well past the upper docks, toward the lower. If she didn't make her way to shore somehow she would be swept out to sea. It took her several more submersions and gasping breaths before she could point her body toward shore. Then it was the painfully slow fight against the current toward the bank and slower waters. It had only been a few minutes, but already she was well past the lower docks and there was only a grassy hill to witness her nearly drowned personage struggle to shore.

Her arms and legs were numb with cold, and she struggled to keep her neck extended up and out of the water. She could feel the box digging into her side, but not

the hand that held it there. A strangled sob of relief broke free along with a few lungfuls of water when she felt dirt beneath her. She crawled out of the water on her knees and hands, her whole body quivering with cold and something else she wouldn't let her mind explore, but she didn't stop crawling until everything, even her toes, were free of the water's grasp.

She had almost stopped shivering by the time she made herself sit up and release her grip on the ground. The river wasn't going to carry her away her mind said, but her body didn't seem to believe it. She spent several more ragged gasps on her knees before she was able to stand, hugging the box to her chest as if the hard sodden thing could offer her some warmth. She didn't dare, even here, so far removed from the guard's barracks use any magic to dry herself off. The guards were looking for her now and would be sensitive to use of magic. She would not be safe until she was back at the guild.

She took a step forward and stopped, frozen. Had Gawin known that her only escape would be the river? Satani could barely feel her lips move and wasn't sure if she was smiling grimly or snarling. If he had planned this, Satani was determined to upend him in a body of water as soon as possible. Preferably one without a bottom and with no exit. Throwing a quick look around to orient herself, Satani moved toward the docks and the gates that would allow her to enter the city once more. No one marked her passage, as she knew they wouldn't. She'd been using the city as an invisibility cloak since childhood. Yesterday was the first time anyone outside the guild had seen her face since the last time she'd dragged herself out of the river's water.

Angry at herself for thinking about the snarls of disgust and hate on the faces of those who had seen her yesterday, Satani forced the flashes to the back of her mind. She had no time for self pity, her future in the guild depended on her getting back by midnight. As it was, midnight would ring through the city in only half a candle mark and even in her strongest condition it was difficult for her to make such a distance so quickly. Satani swung herself up onto the nearest rooftop. She could no longer hear the river, but the city spread out before her in an inviting warren. She plunged into it without hesitation, taking in a few steadying breathes as shaky legs gradually regained confidence as she adopted the familiar rooftop stride.

Chapter 2

Dredion back stepped into the alley as a figure drenched in river water passed by, clutching something square. The scrawny youth slipped into the alley next to him, then up the side of a wall and onto the rooftop. Dredion ducked deeper into the shadows so he would be visible to neither the wet stranger as he or she passed above him and continued north. Once the figure was out of sight and hearing, Dredion joined the others on the roof, scaled up a crumbling pile of bricks that had once been a wall. They did not exchange words aloud, but Dredion could feel in their thoughts the same relief he did at the figure's quick passage.

Gone. No one else within sight, he thought toward the others.

The wet one was kind of scrawny, Rydin said. With his thoughts came a humorous image of a knock-kneed young boy.

Perhaps, but determined, Kestra said, sounding like she admired the human youth.

Dredion turned his attention back to the roofs. Here on the outskirts of the human city, where nature and humans met, the interaction was a bittersweet embrace. He could see few stars here. The light from the mage globes threw up too much of a glare for that. The city's stench was a mixture of human waste with only a few tantalizing tendrils of the outside world to make breathing more bearable.

He could feel the spells cleansing the river water, but these made the water smell like freshly forged metal. He could also smell dockworkers' sweat, which had seeped into the planks of the docks and wharfs. The combination was giving him a headache. It felt like he was stuck inside a smithy's kiln rather than outside next to a vital waterway.

As he looked out over the city, the line of buildings in this section intersected in a dizzying puzzle of rough wooden craftsmanship. He almost couldn't distinguish the alehouse they were looking for from the mess because it was leaning in toward its neighbor like drunken comrades butting heads. Slurred voices and strains of sailors' lyrics spilled out of the shuttered windows and into the night along with the smell of cheap ale.

There, he thought, and the others followed his silent direction to the building. The two left him slipping in opposite directions into the night, while he climbed down to the road level again and made his way across the empty courtyard to the alley wedged between two buildings. While he waited, he leaned back against the brick wall of the alehouse, one knee bent with a foot flat against it for balance. The rumors said this was the busiest pub in the district, but the amount of tiny bone carcasses littering the alley made it look better suited as a rodent catcher's dwelling.

The alley faced west. There was barely enough glow from the mage lights in the street for anyone at the entrance to know it was a dead end. He could not block out the stench of smoke, stale ale, and fried rat on a stick. Dredion drew a cord from his belt and began to nimbly weave and unravel the messages he'd made earlier in his message rope. He was working on describing the inn in his third knot when two figures slithered around the corner and into the mouth of the alley. Dredion read in their swaggering steps, mocking smiles, and hands that swung casually at their sides that they thought they had the upper hand. He didn't pause in his work, creating a warning knot in the darkness as easily as he would have done in the light.

“Well, look here,” the tallest and heaviest set of the two boomed, “a lonely shadow!”

The tall one’s tongue stuck to his vowels the same way his clothes matted to his body, indicating his birth farther south, perhaps in Fevia. Dredion almost let his lips curl into a smile. Instead, he admired his new knot, dangling it where the string’s silver fibers caught what little light was left from the day and glittered down its length.

Perhaps unsure what he held, the two stopped a good yard from him, but were still close enough to the exit that light from street globes warmed their backs. The shorter of the two had a pink scar stretching from the cleft in his chin to his left temple. He raised a hand cutting off, in mid huff, whatever his companion was about to say next.

“What do you want?” he asked simply. “Why ask for us?”

This second sailor had a more neutral accent with fewer garbled syllables, indicating some education. Good. Dredion wasn’t in the mood for another dead end or another fight. Taking his time, Dredion tucked the rope into his belt and folded his arms.

“I heard you have large ears and keen eyes,” Dredion said, with irony.

“Not nearly as large as yours,” the short one muttered, smiling.

The tall one frowned, and Dredion guessed he was either slow or having trouble understanding Dredion’s speech, which was heavy with the lilting inflections of the Elvin tongue. Dredion had never wanted to lose the accent. It made the common tongue more graceful and soothing to the ear, after all.

“What would lure your kind so far into the world of men, elf?” the short one asked. The human’s eyes narrowed while he scrutinized Dredion in the gathering darkness.

“Not many here’d recognize you for what you are,” said the sailor. He must have traveled himself to know of Dredion’s origins.

“In other words, what you paying for the squeaks of a city mouse,” said the tall one. His hand clenched around the handle of a large cudgel, and he looked ready to get to the golden heart of the matter, one way or another.

Dredion didn’t take his eyes off the short one, who stilled his companion with a sharp look and motioned for him to turn out toward the road and be on watch. With a few muttered curses, the human lumbered around to face out and make sure their conversation would not be witnessed. Dredion thought he was just large enough to have a little bit of giant blood in him. Giants weren’t slow of mind, though; maybe that was the human blood in him.

“I’m searching for Starkin and for an old item, worth little to you and yours,” Dredion said, watching the other’s reaction carefully.

The only emotion he gave away was an arched eyebrow, but he wrapped his left thumb around his right pinky to ward off evil.

“Starkin are gone from these parts, as are elves.” The human’s voice was steady. “Maybe they were all mistaken for demons and burned.”

“Is that so?” Dredion asked, gazing speculatively at the ‘roof’ of the alley. “Then, there’s nothing for us to discuss.” He didn’t move because he was sure this human knew what he wanted to know.

“Maybe there is and maybe there isn’t,” he said. The figure shrugged. Obviously he did not believe Dredion would really leave. “I know of the Starkin. Your lot drove them out of your lands well before my great grandfather ever touched a running line on

his first ketch.”For a minute, the human’s eyes turned inward as if he was trying to grasp the years, but when he couldn’t, he shook his head and continued. “I’ve traveled as far south as Ethica and never set eyes on a live Starkin.”

Now his eyes were studying Dredion. Dredion wasn’t allowed to read others’ thoughts without permission, but the sudden tenseness of the sailor’s shoulders suggested the human was wondering whether or not Dredion himself was a Starkin. The human cleared his throat and looked nervous for the first time.

“For the Starkin, you won’t have to travel as far as you fear for answers. There’s been mutterings at the King’s palace. A child, found wandering the woods with eyes like a cat’s and ears larger than a donkey’s and with no one to claim her. The King’s quiet, but the palace walls whisper.”

Dredion re-established his opinion of the sailor. He was well informed, and though he looked to be low in the ranks at the moment, Dredion doubted he would remain so. Maybe he could help Dredion find evidence nearly as important as the Starkin child he’d been sent to retrieve. It might be a mistake , but Dredion made a tossing motion anyway, releasing his magic in the form of an image. The light and magic floated in the air making the shape of a scroll, tightly bound with a crest shaped like an eight-pointed star sealing it. The sailor flinched, but was smart enough not to move except for his eyes, which widened as he stared.

“What of this? Have you seen its like?” Dredion asked. The sailor reached out to touch the magic, but his hand snapped back as if stung.

“No, I’ve never seen it,” he muttered, shifting to the left as if he could see it better there. “It’s old, but hasn’t been through our hold, or any other ships’ that I know of. Ask the Guild master, he might could tell you more.”

Dredion had expected the answer, but his hand clutched at his belt until he forced it to relax. The human wasn’t lying. He reached into his pouch and pulled out a small bag that was heavy and clinked. He prepared to toss it, but froze when the man spoke again.

“Something that might interest you and yours though,” the sailor said, hesitating. “Sixteen years back, when I came to Ethica with my pap to join my first schooner, two Starkin were found outside the city, in the forest. They were burnt to a crisp. Magic they said. Everyone here figured them for demons, everyone but my pap, who’d been to many shores, including Dragon Isle.”

Dredion frowned. Sixteen years. The timing was about right, but two bodies?

“Outside the walls?” Dredion asked. “Which direction?”

“North, along the river, seven days by pole boat,” the sailor said pointing north, but Dredion didn’t follow his finger. He focused instead on the sailor’s face and words, trying to sort out any lies. “A scavenger friend of paps found toys, the like for a young child, but no other bodies were found.”

The human shifted nervously casting furtive glances in the darkness when Dredion didn’t say anything. He’d stilled himself so that his body seemed to seep into the night around him completely; it was a defensive trick he’d learned for moments of deep thought.

“I’ve told you more than you’re like to hear from others,” the human said, his voice held a slight quaver. “As for the scroll, visit the Thief’s Guild if you dare. For the right price, they’d work with you, or anyone for that matter.”

Dredion brought his thoughts back to the alley. He flicked the bag at the human who plucked it from the air with ease and hefted it in his hand. He nodded, apparently satisfied.

“Glad to be of service,” he said. “I wish you luck in collecting your things quickly, so your departure isn’t delayed.” The sailor’s voice wasn’t hostile, but wasn’t friendly either. It seemed some tales really had survived the ages to make this one so wary. The sailor turned to go, but stopped, drawing Dredion’s attention back to the alley’s entrance. The sailor stood half in and out with a frown furrowing the bridge of his nose.

“You’re not the only searcher for Starkin.”

With that he clapped the partial giant’s shoulder, and the two disappeared from sight. Dredion considered going after him, but the night was deepening and the King would be expecting their presence for dinner. Dredion signaled for the others to join him. Had they started searching too late after all? Were their enemies a step ahead?

There was little time left. Dredion started moving even as the two shadowy forms leapt from their positions on the rooftops above and landed in a crouch beside him. Their bows, which had been trained on the two humans during the conversation, were now strapped securely to their backs. They were watching Dredion grimly as they followed him. He felt them pick up the unpleasant turn of his thoughts and quickly shielded them. There was no reason to worry them.

“It’s as Master Haywin feared,” Rydin muttered at Dredion’s left. They slipped out of the alley again into the courtyard. The sailors were nowhere in sight.

Dredion picked the closest road that would lead toward the city’s heart to the east. All roads eventually led to the palace. He was trying to figure out which was more disturbing, that the Starkin they were in the process of rescuing was probably in danger, or that another trail had been revealed. It would be a dusty trail, one he couldn’t afford the time to follow now. One thing at a time, he cautioned himself. Master Haywin would have to forgive him, but the life of a living Starkin came before lying to rest the ghosts of the past.

“Come, she can only cover our absence for so long,” he said. With their direction set, Rydin took the lead. The path they took through the human city was quick, but not as effortless as a forest would have been. While the humans prepared to sleep, the three elves became like shadows, disappearing into a greater darkness.

Dredion trusted the Lady would introduce him to what or whom he needed when the time was right. Without looking upward, he could feel the nearly full moon and the stars breath their soothing energies and rhythms across the sky. It wasn’t the answers he needed or the council from Master Haywin he desperately desired, but it was a comforting presence, a reminder of the Lady watching over him. It helped him to calm his thoughts as they closed the distance between the palace and a young Starkin he had to extract from a curious king’s grasp.

Chapter 3

Satani carried the box close to her chest. She was being as careful as she could while running across sloped roofs with muddy, bare feet and damp clothing, but she'd already slipped several times. Her knees felt like water by the time she entered the oldest part of the city. To save time, she had attempted several leaps across the gaps between buildings she didn't usually attempt on her way through the city. Gawin would be nearby. He had probably watched her for most of the last two days since the beginning of the assignment.

She slowed as she entered the old noble's district, which had been built away from the river water in the old days for safety. Before magic healing and water cleansing practices because common deadly diseases had emanated from the river water. Many said the water had been as dangerous as any invading army.

The stone buildings here were arranged along crumbling cobbles. Time and disuse after the fires had ruined nearly everything else as well. She'd always thought they looked more like the ghosts of real buildings – never quite solid. A thick mist covered the area most evenings strengthening that particular impression. One of the old kings had declared it unlucky land, but the Thief's Guild declared it theirs. Most buildings were empty, but the largest complex, the old palace, was whole. It spread out in a dizzying warren of buildings connected by enclosed hallways and open walks of stone and wood.

No one in the city below the third gate passed into these quarters without an invitation—even then they entered with trepidation. The king was officially unaware of the guild's presence, though Satani knew the king had called on their services, unofficially, more than once. As she passed the outer line of the Guild's territory, she felt

the sentries' eyes following her. She slowed her stride, straightening her spine and keeping the box tucked under her elbow, as hidden as an object of such size could be. She knew there were at least two watchers in the alley to her left. She could hear the shuffle of soft boots on tile from another sentry on a rooftop. The top of the building looked strangely like the cap of an angular mushroom. The scent coming down wind of crumbled leaves and sap said whoever the last sentry was had climbed one of the few trees that had taken root after the war.

The sentries recognized her, which was the only reason she had made it so far without something sharp protruding from her body. However, she knew better than to think she was safe. The ones who recognized her were all the more likely to seek revenge for some slight or another. Revenge conveniently disguised as mistaken identity. She breathed easier when she passed the sentry ring without incident. The last attempted to “mistake” her for an intruder must have made a strong impression. She left those two alive, but they had been off duty for a few weeks while bones mended.

She peeked over her shoulder and saw a figure rounding the corner. The wide shoulders and hair nearly as blonde as her own meant it was Gawin. She smiled, purposefully flashing her teeth at him, an insult that meant he wasn't worth being stealthy around. He frowned in her direction. He probably assumed he had the best route from the wharf, but she had spent several years making the distance a dozen times a day when she was still a retriever. She'd found that immigrants fresh from the boats were the best fodder for her pickpocket quota.

Satani didn't wait for him to approach. She tucked the knives she had slipped down from their holsters, back into her sleeves. She was in front of her preferred

entrance, which wasn't a true one by most standards. The short wall blocked a small garden from view of the street and was easy to climb even when exhausted, wet, cold, and bruised.

Well, maybe not easy.

Her muscles felt like they were moving through molasses as she tensed to swing herself up and over the top, the box still cradled in the crook of her elbow. Satani made it to the top without too much trouble, but when she landed on the other side, her legs gave out. She tumbled forward. She heard the whistle and felt the feathers of a crossbow bolt cut her as it passed, shattering against the stonewall at her back.

Satani turned her fall into a controlled tumble tossing a knife in mid flip before she came up in a shaky, leaf-covered crouch. One of her knives sparked as it hit a marble statue on the roof of the building across the courtyard. Her assailant was gone, only leaving behind the arrow that glinted like the canine tooth of a displeased beast in the moonlight. She estimated that if she had landed properly, the bolt would have sunk clean through her right eye and pinned her brain to the wall. A good shot, she admitted.

She looked up at the roof across the courtyard where the figure had crouched in the lee of a chimney. Her knife was lying on the ground a few feet away it had bounced off one of the gargoyles. It had been a weak throw. She had not even coming close to actually hitting her attacker. She jogged over to retrieve her knife. She'd spent far too much money paying the forger to weave in non-chipping spells to leave it rusting in a wet pile of leaves. She was slipping. Perhaps she needed to increase her knife throwing practice to everyday.

Running a hand over the blade to make sure the non-chipping spells had really worked, Satani mused that she would have to find a creative way to repay her would-be assassin. She had recognized his profile against the night sky as she fell. Squeaky, a level-two retriever with a bad habit of making careless noises during missions, had a unique stance. Satani sheathed her knife and began planning a suitable retribution.

She reached up to remove a damp leaf that was sticking to her hair and forehead. She shivered from cold and looked down to find that her damp clothes had picked up nearly every leaf in the courtyard. Satani began brushing leaves from her hair with one hand and the back of her pants with the other. She stopped, both hands suddenly clenching around leaves, hair and fabric. She'd dropped the box.

Satani scrambled back to the wall, dropped to her knees, searching through the nearest bushes to find what she had dropped in her tumble. She located it, lying up against a leaf-bare pear tree. The lid was cracked open and shards of what used one of the rarest vases in the realm glinted in the moonlight.

Cursing in every language she'd managed to pick up such appropriate words in, she stood. Satani couldn't take her gaze from the box even when someone else approached. She would have winced if such an expression could have helped, but it wouldn't and so she didn't. Gawin stepped forward, and she watched him from the corner of her eyes as his eyes narrowed to slits. There was anger, but there was also unrestrained pleasure at her failure. Satani clenched her eyes closed, but could still feel his contentment rolling off him in waves even before he opened his mouth.

"Well now," Gawin said. "Looks like you've earned yourself some trouble."

Satani's arms felt like bricks where her hands should have been, and her feet were rooted deeper than the pear tree weighted them down. Her eyes drifted from shards that glittered in the mage light to the lift of Gawin's lips.

"I got it into the compound," she heard herself say.

"What?" Gawin asked, folding his arms across his chest. The amusement held in his small smirk and glittering eyes seemed to leach away and was replaced by deeper lines between his eyes. It was a clear danger sign, but she couldn't seem to stop herself.

"I got it into the compound."

"You brought the vase into the compound?" he asked, his voice nearly a purr. "So what? Your incompetence shattered it. Does 'getting into the compound' make the vase whole again? Replace the nearly 4,000 dramans we would have been able to sell it for?"

"You said to bring it back here," Satani, said her cheeks and the rest of her skin flushing. Her limbs felt light again, but weary. "If you want payment, I suggest you seek the owner of this. I'm going to bed."

She bent and snatched up the arrow that had nearly killed her. She flipped it toward Gawin hoping he would get a splinter. Not waiting to see if he did, she turned toward the inner compound. It wasn't the first time she'd angered Gawin. She'd pay for it as she always did. She made it only a few steps before he was at her side, with the box under his right elbow and the arrow gripped in fist.

"You are the most incompetent, disgusting excuse for a thief I have ever seen," Gawin said almost casually as if he were complimenting daisies not shredding her existence. They were the same variety of insults he always used. Large words that not

many thieves she spoke to would actually have understood. There were others so ugly in meaning many thieves she knew would have been taking notes for their next verbal battle.

“If it were up to me, I’d have cut off the tips of your ears the first day you arrived, you scrawny, sniveling little—” Gawin’s words hissed through the air around her as she floated through his insults and the compound with all the awareness of a ghost.

She could imagine how a real ghost must feel, with no physical connection to anything but her own progress through the living. Maybe it would be preferable, this ghost-like state, rather than remaining with those whose hearts still beat. After all, she did just fail the last mission of her testing period. If she were lucky, she’d only be sent back to retriever. Satani winced. Level one, mostly pickpocket work that required the finesse and expertise of a trained monkey.

Light and noise spilled freely through the windows facing inward into the old palace’s heart. The guild’s mages made sure no noise leaked into the city side. The stark emptiness and silence was useful.

“You’ll be lucky if they don’t have you on the streets again picking the pockets of drunken farm boys. Or maybe we’ll let them pick you. Hands still muddy from the fields. There’s many out there with tastes for the unusual,” he said.

Satani didn’t take any of the entrances that lead into the inner hallways. She could see through the windows that they were bustling with people. Thieves wearing fresh night gear joked with thieves wearily wiping coal from their faces and scratching heads itchy from black hoods. Other figures shuffled with hands folded behind their backs. These were buyers with an opening in their ship’s hold or a wagon for transportable goods.

Such spaces, the guild was routinely assured, wouldn't be seen past the golden glint in the right person's eyes.

Farther in the complex were the storage wings where goods recently acquired were stored. Through these windows, which were flung open to let in the chill breeze, she could see two thieves arranging a set of silver troughs and goblets. She recognized Quaver. He trained her during several missions when she first earned her level-two rank and was allowed to leave the streets as a pickpocket and begin the lower-level retrieval assignments.

"You should'a seen it," he said, his jaw quivering. "Surrounded by blue bells and needing a little extra leverage to get good and loose, but worth it."

Bluebells was code for royal guards and extra leverage translated to magic. If Quaver were true to form, he had uncovered some ancient stash of swords or weaponry. He had a strange talent for finding those.

Her pace, shadowed by the far from silent form of Gawin, carried her steadily through the complex. The buildings here were darker and quieter as the young pickpockets and those who were not on retrieval duty slumbered. Near the heart of the palace, which she thought was shaped vaguely like the inside of a conk shell, was the central building, where the king's ancestors had once lived. It was now the Guild Masters' suite.

Gawin's stream of insults and threats ended, and she nearly tripped while stepping up onto a covered boardwalk at the abrupt halt of sound. The hairs on the back of her neck rose, and her magical senses chimed in uneasily that there were more than just eyes trained on her. Magic, under the control of the Guild master's personal guards, practically shivered in anticipation of being used.

Satani could ignore the mages. She didn't fear an attack so close to the suite that rested in the center of a small field and garden. She stepped farther down the covered walkway and felt Gawin's eyes like needles pricking the skin at the base of her neck. However, they both jumped as a voice whispered out of thin air, practically in her ear.

"You've stirred up trouble it seems," Kamen said, his voice warm on her neck.

Satani didn't turn immediately. It was imperative Kamen never see weakness. She steadied her nerves with deep breaths and clenched her jaw to hold in words she could say to Gawin, but never to Kamen. Because she was tense and weary, her magic felt almost slippery when she grasped it. Before she lost control completely, she wrung the water from her clothes and skin so that the water sloughed off onto the boardwalk. Under her magic's guidance the puddle streamed off the walkway and into the dirt. Kamen hated a mess.

She rubbed a hand across her face to scrub off what was left of the smeared river residue. The scar curling around her right eye in tall sensitive ridges ended mid cheek and ached with the cold. Feeling more presentable, Satani released the magic. She had a little trouble undoing the clasp that was barely keeping her hair bound after dip in the river. Usually her hair was the color of yellow butter or hay; now it was damp, bringing out darker lowlights. She could also feel more than a little egg.

She tucked long strands behind the points of her ears. The ears and the eyes she had been born with, but the scar that had caused mothers to shriek and cover their children's eyes this morning were from her past. It was a past she couldn't remember, she could remember nothing before she woke on the banks of the river a child still around ten

years old most conjectured. Considering the extent of her scarring, Satani figured she was better off not remembering whatever had caused them.

Presentable enough for now. Satani turned toward Kamen. He was the only person who could still catch her unawares, and he liked to remind her of that fact. Light flared as Kamen exerted the energy she did not have left to make a mage globe. The small ball of light floated in the air above and to the left of his head.

“Welcome home Satani, my little demon,” Kamen said.

His voice tipped over vowels in the same lilting accent he had used thirteen years before when she kneeled before him for the first time. He had changed little, only becoming shorter as she grew and her perspective changed. However, he was still a good head and half taller than she. The years she had been with him were not reflected in his strong, straight frame. There was no gray in the brown curly hair that was pulled back in a loose ponytail framing his square chin, high cheekbones and prominent nose. He wore a dragon-scale earring that was the same mercury gray as his eyes and shimmered in the mage light as he cocked his head. It was a habit he had when contemplating, usually something unpleasant.

“Kamen,” she said, her voice barely a whisper, not daring to speak louder for fear her voice would crack. Gawin had no such problem. He shoved past her lifting the lid of the box to reveal a nest of cloth and broken glass.

“I told you she wasn’t reliable, wouldn’t be competent with even a hundred more years of experience under her belt,” Gawin said

Kamen’s frown was a frightening thing. She had seen it make the captain of the guard bow his head and silence men and women, of high and low status, utterly. His

smile, however, curled from one ear to the next and even Gawin was wary of it. The thief stepped back, withdrawing quickly from Kamen's line of sight. Satani bore Kamen's gaze, hunching her shoulders despite herself.

"It was an easy enough task," Kamen said.

Satani could see Gawin nod from the corner of her eye, but said nothing. He had been Kamen's bodyguard long enough to know when speaking was dangerous.

"Perhaps a little time relearning the basics is necessary," Kamen said.

Satani couldn't stop herself from looking up at that, from opening her mouth to protest. Before a word could escape, he was on her. His momentum carried them backward until her back slammed into the square wooden post that supported the roof of the passageway. Kamen used one hand to pin her to the post and the other grabbed her chin forcing her to look up at him. She didn't fight. His grip was painful, but as unbreakable as her spelled knives.

"Yes? You had something to say?" He waited.

Her words felt like rust in her mouth. It had taken her so many years to rise to even this level. She couldn't do it again. She had to convince him. His grip tightened. Satani winced as the corner of the beam dug into her back. There was only one thing she could do. She begged.

"Please," she said, and made her voice as strong as she could. She didn't look to see if Gawin could hear. For once, she didn't care. Only Kamen could forgive her. It was only from him that she wanted forgiveness.

“Give me another chance,” Satani said. She met his gaze squarely, hoping she was not showing too much weakness. He hated weakness far more than messiness. Gawin snorted derisively and dared to speak now that Kamen’s hands were otherwise occupied.

“She’s useless, not worth wasting any more of your time or tutelage,” he said. His sigh even sounded heartfelt. “Such a pity.”

Satani didn’t waste time glaring at him. She held Kamen’s eyes and forced every minute stirring of determination in her soul up into her eyes.

“I’ll do anything,” she said.

Even the breeze slipped past them carefully while Kamen considered her. He released the hold on her shoulder, but not her chin. She didn’t move, waiting. He turned her face this way and that, his eyes following the curve of her left cheekbone, which was unmarred by scars. Satani shivered. Her skin flared with heat then plunged into ice. He nodded and releases her.

“Perhaps,” Kamen said, his smile waning. “Perhaps it was all a waste.”

Kamen turned to leave and Gawin chuckled deep in his chest. Satani felt as if a fist was clenched around her chest when he turned from her. If he kept walking away she would be alone again. She could still remember it, the fear of wandering through the streets trying to find a place to sleep and something to eat. She was older now, but her age would not wash away her scars or her ears and eyes. These things would still earn her hatred and fear in the city. The guild was the only place she was safe. Kamen needed her, wanted her and nobody else would. The tightness stole her breath. Things or people Kamen thought a waste did not survive long—not that she’d want to survive if he did keep walking away.

“Please,” she said. This time her voice did crack and so did her pride, what little she had managed to cultivate during her years in the Guild. She pushed herself away from the beam and stumbled forward. She cut off Kamen’s path back to his rooms. She didn’t even wince when her knees hit the floorboards with a crack that echoed through the courtyard and sent pain shooting up to the roots of her teeth.

Kamen stopped, ignoring Gawin’s grunt of protest and making a small motion that must have made the mage-guards relax, because she could no longer feel lightning gathering in the air. The edge of light from Kamen’s mage globe was nearly touching her, but she was mostly in the shadows.

“I don’t like groveling,” he said. His voice held no discernable emotion. Just a statement of truth. Satani had nothing else left up her sleeves to offer, but her dignity. If it worked, it would be well worth the loss.

“Please,” she said again and bowed her head to the floor until the scar on her forehead touched wood worn smooth by the passage of thieves.

“I will give you one last chance,” Kamen said. Satani lifted her head only enough to see his face.

“But this time, my little Satani, failure will not mean demotion. Far more serious consequences will lie for you at the end of this particular task. Come.”

Satani was so used to following orders, she didn’t realize she moved until she brushed by Gawin. She was careful not to look at him. He would make her pay, but right now she was safe. She padded by down the walkway snug inside Kamen’s shadow as he retreated to his suite. His profile was haloed by light from the mage globe that guided her toward her only chance for redemption.

Chapter 4

Satani had already planned at least a dozen ways she could kill the old woman. If it weren't for Gawin sitting in the corner of Kamen's study glaring at her, she might have attempted one or two of them. As it was, she simply gritted her teeth and cursed herself for being a fool. Being demoted couldn't be worse than this; even a beating from both Gawin and Kamen, another trip into the river or nearly any other evil they could imagine would be preferable.

"Pull back your shoulders," the hag shrilled, stalking around Satani with her arms folded, her extraordinarily long nose tilted upward and eyes that cut deeper than glass leaving bloody trails over Satani's body.

"Lift that ugly chin of yours with something resembling confidence and elegance."

Satani was standing in the center of Kamen's second study in a skirt and blouse, fuming. All the furniture was shoved up against the walls. She did not remember the old woman's name, but had dubbed her Buzzard because her nose and eyes reminded her of a particularly evil carrion eater. She even circled like one, poking and prodding Satani into what she said was the proper way to stand. Gritting her teeth, Satani bent her knee just so at a command, lifting an arm, elbow first and wrist last with the edge of the shawl resting elegantly between thumb and forefinger. She tried to ignore the sheer glee that radiated from their audience.

Gawin sat with his legs crossed beneath him on top of a side table, snacking contentedly on the lunch meant for Satani. The Buzzard, whose chin barely reached Satani's shoulder, had swatted aside her hand when she reached for the food. She'd

squawked that as far as a lady's figure went, Satani's waist was passable, but since her breasts were apparently undersized, they needed to stay on the safe side of lady-like measurements. All food was to be vegetable in nature and portion-size appropriate.

Satani had only eaten a carrot in the last twelve hours and was seriously considering the amount of energy it would take to knock Gawin off his seat and take a few bites before he could retaliate. Satani was learning to impersonate a noblewoman under the tutelage of this woman. Every gesture, every word out of her mouth was picked apart and reassembled into something she barely recognized.

"You're a noble woman, not a cowherd, now walk like one," the woman snapped for the hundredth time in the two days she had been ruling over Satani's every move.

Satani pulled her lips into the small quirk the woman called a mysterious smile. The Buzzard had rewarded her with the carrot for achieving it so quickly. Then took a step only to feel the not-so-feather-like crack of the woman's cane across her backside.

"Your behind should not remain behind, pull it in and tighten those cheeks!"

Satani staggered forward before she could right herself, ignoring Gawin's snort of laughter as she straightened her back until she felt like the bones in her spine had an inch separating them, while attempting to let her shoulders and neck be perfectly relaxed.

Apparently, she succeeded.

"Good," the Buzzard said. "Took long enough. Now, let's see how long you can hold it. A noble woman is expected to be poised at all times, whether or not someone is looking. If this fool's charade is to work, you must make every movement prove you have as much right to be in the presence of other nobles as a true-blooded Lady does. Your movements, your speech, and your dancing must be perfect or they will spot you as

a fraud immediately. The king is excessively fond of chopping off the heads of impersonators.”

Satani had held fighting stances for hours at a time during training, but had never felt quite so foolish or strangely vulnerable as she did now, attempting to simply stand with nobility. For the thousandth time, she wondered why she had been so hasty to promise to do anything. Her time spent tied up in the market square was a type of torture she understood; the past two days had been something else completely.

Satani still felt flushed and jittery when she thought about the dance lessons that had taken place in the courtyard around Kamen’s rooms. Thieves whistling from rooftops and open windows, betting on how many times she, or Gawin would trip. Why she was learning all these useless skills had still not been revealed to her, but when Kamen gave an order she had no choice but to obey, especially now. She’d said she could and would do anything, but she had never imagined this.

“Good. Now back to speaking,” the woman said. “You don’t have quite the language one would expect of a lower city thief, but I imagine Kamen is to thank for that. Just remember to round those vowels. Let’s practice. Repeat after me: Yes, M’ lord. I would be most honored to dance.”

Over and over, Satani spoke to imaginary lords and ladies about the weather, the dancing, and the palace’s beautifully lit ballroom. Standing, sitting, sipping water from a fancy wine glass or dancing with Gawin, whose grin was enough to make her want to stomp his toes. She spent another two days of eating carrots and dancing before Kamen finally reappeared. The rain had caused the Buzzard to usher Satani and Gawin indoors for their dance lesson, much to the dismay of the thieves who had been betting. Satani

was dancing with Gawin to what was one of the most popular new waltzes when Kamen slipped into the room. She knew the moment he was there and watched him from the corner of her eyes during a particularly difficult set of turns. She managed them easily, though Gawin seemed to get a little tangled in his own steps. She caught the Buzzard's slight nod and Kamen's return gesture. His simple nod sent the Buzzard from her perch by the window flying out of the room to search out new carrion.

Satani put on that mysterious smile she had been taught and in the middle of one of the most complicated step patterns slipped a foot in Gawin's path so he tripped. He didn't fall, but he did have to stumble a few steps before he could regain his balance. Satani stood her ground as he came forward with fists balled.

"Enough! Gawin, Satani." Kamen said. Gawin didn't even break stride, but instead of hitting her, he loosened his fists and walked past Satani to take his place at Kamen's side. Satani kept her smile intact and continued to hold herself as she had been trained, knowing Kamen expected it.

"Good," he said, crossing his arms over his chest. "It seems you've been putting effort into the lessons. Wise choice."

Satani nodded carefully, using the motion the Buzzard had said accented the lines of a lady's neck as well as drew attention down to the chest. Kamen's eyes did not drift south, but there was a slight flicker in his gaze. She flushed, but stood her ground. He's the one who had her shoved into a skirt and forced her to endure these lessons.

"You know what you will be doing for your next assignment?" Kamen asked, moving to the desk and sitting on its edge. Satani nodded. He watched her, waiting.

“I’ll be impersonating a noblewoman,” she said. “I’ve heard there’s a ball at the palace. I would imagine it would be for that.”

She had heard a few others in the hallways talking about the king’s extravaganza and felt her stomach flutter anxiously at the thought. What place did she have at the palace? At a ball for that matter? She didn’t realize her hands were touching the burn scars that ran along her brow and down her cheek until she saw Kamen looking there. She dropped her hands. Sending her into the ball like she’d been sent into the square would result in something deadlier than rotten fruit.

“Very astute Satani. You make me glad I’ve put so much energy into your education,” Kamen said. He trailed a hand across his desk. “You’ll not be noticed. It’s a ball that, with some urging, has been designed as a masked ball. With your new skills, you’ll be able to blend in as a minor nobleman’s daughter from the south being introduced to court as ready for marriage. Your kind rises and fades as quickly as fireflies at court. It will provide you with just enough anonymity to get in and not to be too noticeable.”

Satani kept her face carefully neutral, but she wanted to frown. A lot could go wrong in the time it took to dance with a few nobles, but maybe that’s what he intended. She would make a good distraction. Kamen was long past needing to know her thoughts from her face. He laughed and there was a warning in it.

“No, I’ll not be selling you to a noblemen as a novelty mistress,” Kamen said, but Satani didn’t doubt he had considered it at some point during the years she’d lived at the guild. It was Kamen’s habit to be prepared and to have contingency plans for everything and everyone.

“You’ll simply get into the ball as a way to get into the palace,” Kamen said. He gestured and the room thrummed with his magical signature as a silver map appeared in mid air. The palace was laid out before her in lines made of light and energy. Kamen pointed.

“Here is the ball room, where all the nobles, guards and mages will be congregating,” he said. His finger trailed from a large empty space in the front portion of the palace down a hallway west. The palace branched off into four wings. The foremost wing she recognized as where the healers and the king’s mages lived. It was there, on the fourth and top floor Kamen’s finger jabbed into a small space, a seemingly insignificant room.

“Here, is where I want you to be before midnight,” Kamen said. “Your only responsibility is to bring Gawin into this room and out of the palace again without tripping any wards. He will handle everything inside the room on his own.”

Satani felt Kamen’s gaze on her. He was wearing an odd look, but his lips were curled at the corners into his version of a mischievous grin.

“From here, you’ll make your way out of the castle and to a side gate before the bell finishes tolling midnight,” Kamen said. “The spells on the palace walls cannot be penetrated without attracting attention except by those who are part of the shields. You’ll only have one chance to get out of the castle unnoticed. Once out, I’ll meet you at the fountain. Be ready to leave.”

Satani knew breaking into the palace and smuggling something out from under the king’s nose was a death sentence. There would be mages and their protections everywhere and guards whose only purpose was to sniff out foul play. Gawin looked like

he had eaten something rotten, and she knew he was thinking of going through all of that danger with her in the lead. Gawin's magic was not as strong as her own, but he had years of experience beyond hers. Satani did not try to hide the satisfaction from her face, but it faded quickly as Kamen's last words caught up with her.

"Leave?" Satani asked, looking up from the magical city he had built around the palace to trace a path to the docks she had visited only a few days before.

"Yes," Kamen said. "The city will be a little too aware after the ball for any magic, but that of the king's mages. Do not concern yourself with anything other than getting to the fountain on time and unnoticed."

Satani nodded, letting her gaze drift over to Gawin, who was frowning at Kamen. Probably his objection had to do with her presence all together. Before he could voice it, she asked, "What will we be retrieving?"

Kamen waved a hand, and the city and palace faded, reabsorbing into the air or into Kamen himself.

"That is of little concern to you." He circled Satani slowly; his shoulder's brushing against hers. Satani held her ground. She didn't crane her head to follow his progress.

"You have tried my patience these last few weeks," he said, from behind before working his way in front of her again. "Your failure with the vase was disappointing, and I have yet to decide how to punish you for it. However, if you fail here, whatever punishment you may receive for the vase will seem paltry in comparison. Do you understand?"

Satani would have nodded, but he was behind her again. Instead, she answered using the elevated tones she'd learned from Buzzard. A slight tremor of maidenly virtue as well as the layers of the mysteriousness a noblewoman would use when speaking to a Lord of higher station and potential marriagablility.

“Yes m’lord, I will, of course, strive to please you.”

Kamen finished his circling. He stood before her and Satani recognized the look in his eyes. The same she had seen the first time they met. She felt as if she'd been placed on an imaginary scale.

“You may be too smart for your own good Satani, my little demon,” he said and turned away, drawing Gawin with him toward the door.

“Go next door,” he ordered without turning. “They are preparing everything for you there. I’ve left a map for you to study. Memorize it.”

Satani had never been in Kamen’s guest quarters, but had little opportunity to look around. The second she entered, half a dozen maids were waiting with empty hands that they soon filled with one or more pieces of Satani’s clothing. The makeshift skirt and blouse were stripped away along with all her under clothes until she stood before them completely bare.

They did not comment on the old burn scars, similar to the ones on her face, that ran from left shoulder to her the base of her ribs on her right side. Instead, in a constant stream of chatter she could hardly pick out as a true language, they unceremoniously dumped her into a tub of steaming water. With upturned noses they proceeded to scrub

through layers of dirt and skin with tough bristled brushes and lavender soap until she was pink and tender to the touch.

The maids ignored her and avoided looking at her face or back, though they were gentler with the brush in those regions. They chatted with each other and Satani appreciated their noise. It was better than the stark fearful silence the guild's servants usually observed around her. After her first year in the guild, when she had begun her magical training, rumors spread that she experimented with magic on servants and from then on none could be found within a dozen yards of her. However, just as she was tied to Kamen's whims, so too were they

While they massaged sweet-smelling oils into her hair and scalp, Satani studied the maps of the palace that were hovering in magical definition in the center of the room. Occasionally she would tweak its angle with her own magic or draw it closer for inspection. Too soon she was dragged from the baths; the warmth had liquefied her muscles. The maids ushered her into the main room, and the palace outline followed obediently. Satani stood in front of two tall standing mirrors, but avoided her own naked reflection, still studying the maps.

The air in the room filled with the scent of lilac as a thick cloud of powder was dabbed on every inch of her body, despite her angry demands to why powder should ever go in certain places. Following the smelly, silky barrage, the maids began to dress her as if she were a life-sized doll. The small clothes were much too sheer for her comfort and the corset they fought her into seemed designed to shove her chest directly under her nose. Mercifully, the corset was shorter than they were normally designed. Hopefully it wouldn't restrict her movement as much as her breathing.

Following the under clothes, the dress was enough to pull all her attention from the map. The maids poked and prodded Satani until she stepped into piece after piece of fabric, and tried not to fidget as it seemed dozens of buttons, ribbons, laces and hooks were fixed and fastened. Finally, after the dress was fitted, pinned, and in some places sewn on, the maids pushed her into a chair and tackled her hair, while others attached sparkling diamonds through two holes they punched into her ears. Satani used healing magic to make her lobes stop burning and which helped leech out the redness. If the maids noticed, they made no comment as they slipped more precious jewels around her neck and on her fingers.

It felt strange the weight of all the fabric and pull of the bracelets around her wrist. She never would have believed a dress could be so heavy. Even the necklace around her neck felt foreign and cold, something unnatural.

Satani was startled from her final mental run through the map. The chatter had stopped. One of the younger maids had been talking about the newest second-level retriever who seemed to have a habit of collecting women's under clothes, but now the loudest noise was one of the maids breathing out of her mouth. Confused, Satani stood, hefting the weight of the dress and jewels along with her and went to look in the tall standing mirror. The reflection froze with mouth hanging open. She looked taller. The dress accentuated her breasts waist and hips by alternately clinging and flowing out. The dress was made from dark green fabric that was delicately worked with silver stitching along the square bodice, the waist and the edges of the sleeves and hem. Kamen often wore the same combination of colors.

Satani blushed and noticed with mortification how the color continued down her neck and spread across her chest, which thanks to the neckline of the dress was now largely revealed. The sleeves were split at the shoulder and fell in two long trains that nearly swept the floor. The inside was lined with silver, shimmering cloth.

Satani stopped touching the fabric when the calluses on her hand snagged on the fabric. One of the maids broke the silence and the stillness in the room by fetching a device to file down the worst calluses and then rubbed lotion in. The others giggled and whispered about the unlikely transformation that had taken place, despite knowing the results were their accomplishment.

She couldn't stop looking at herself. How had they piled her hair into such a seemingly effortless fountain of curls? Her hair looked lighter as well. It was a warmer, deeper tone. She turned to find ringlets spilled down her back and fell around her face accenting high cheekbones while easily concealing pointed ears. Silver flowers made from precious stones glittered from within the nest of curls. If she tallied the worth of all of them, she could buy a nice house in the merchant's district.

Her ears were hidden so well that Satani could only see the lobe of each that held dangling metal threads with diamonds some of which were easily the size of her pinky nail. Those would feed her and a dozen other thieves for the entire winter. Satani massaged her earlobes. They ached with the weight.

Inevitably, her hands traveled up to touch her face and the scars. The curls, jewelry, beautiful gown and everything else seemed so out of place, especially when Satani added her face to the picture. A maid cleared her throat and held out a mask. It was a half mask that would fit over her eyes, forehead and cheeks, leaving her nose, mouth

and chin exposed. The areas that would remain uncovered had already been dusted with powders that made her skin glow.

The porcelain mask was covered in designs created by delicately placed tiny jade stones. The pattern resembled ivy of some kind that twined across the cheekbones, trailed up past the temples and met in the forehead to form an intricately braided ivy circle. In the center was an eight-pointed star made from silver paint. Her fingers followed the lines over the mask. Then she rubbed her forehead, which was burning. She also had a headache pressing at her temples. Maybe it was the carrots. One should really have more than carrots for lunch.

Her fingers continued to trace the raised edges of the star as she studied the eyes, which were almond shaped and tilted up at the corners, much like her own. A gauze of sheer silver silk was pinned to cover each hole. Satani pressed the mask to her face. She could see clearly, though she had a suspicion that others would not be able to see her eyes as easily. The maids connected the mask to small hooks disguised as hairpins placed along her hairline. Satani didn't think it would stay, but once the maids took their hands away it didn't move. Her disguise was complete.

Next, an elderly maid showed her where her weapons were hidden. There were two needle thin daggers disguised as hair decorations, a few throwing knives tucked in her bodice and hidden by the bow at her back. Other weapons were suspended within bunches of fabric in her skirt. The number was impressive, though Satani was already considering where to put a few more. She was gaining a grudging respect for the attire. She could tell the fabric had been cut carefully so when she moved she would not be too hampered.

Satani stood staring at herself in the mirror. She looked like a noblewoman, but a pretty dress, fancy hair and expensive jewelry were just part of the equation. She'd have to walk, talk, dance, eat, breath and think like a noblewoman. How could she get out of this? She did want out; she felt like the bears that wore colorful collars and danced around for others enjoyment during summer fairs. She considered accidentally ripping a sleeve. She had gone so far as to find a promising splinter of wood on the nightstand, when the door opened.

Kamen entered, but stopped in the doorway. Satani thought he might be surprised, but, if he was, he hid the emotion quickly. He shut the door and nodded toward the maids who were waiting respectfully in the corner. Kamen was smiling, but it was different, not dangerous. There was a decidedly wolfish smile. Satani flushed under the mask and turned away when she realized the flush was still apparent in other areas.

"This may work almost too well," Kamen said. "You'll most certainly be asked to dance. You will do so. Talk, mingle, and pretend to be young and naive. However, keep careful track of the hour. Pretend to be fatigued and ask to be excused to the healer's wing. Once Gawin is retrieved to escort you, you'll have little time to complete the task. Do you have the maps memorized?"

She nodded still not turning toward him. The mass of curls seemed to shift above her, but the maids had assured her should the palace fall down around her, her hair at least would stay in place.

"Satani," Kamen snapped drawing her attention down from her hair. He'd said something and she'd missed it. He sighed and rubbed a hand at his temple closing his eyes.

“Wake up Satani and get to work,” he said. He jabbed a finger toward the door. Satani’s eyes followed his arm and her body responded. However, her stomach lurched with the simple movement, and she was suddenly glad Gawin had eaten the pig blanket she was supposed to have eaten for supper.

She stepped past Kamen so closely her skirts brushed his leg and was there was barely enough room for her skirts to pass through the doorway without catching on wood. Gawin was waiting on the otherside of the door in servants’ livery looking as if he were regretting the pig blanket already. Satani’s spirits lifted as she was guided through the hall toward the carriage. She tossed the cloak one of the maids had pressed into her hands toward Gawin and climbed in, shutting the carriage door in his face. After all, servants rode outside the carriage.

Chapter 5

Rydin's gusting sigh from across the room caused his companions to laugh and knowing Rydin, that was the point. Dredion laughed as well, but also felt like sighing as he looked down at the hideously out- of-date formal attire of the court. It was a small sacrifice to make for rescuing a Starkin, one of the few remaining elves with the goddess' mark, he kept reminding himself.

"Why dear Goddess," Rydin said, his voice taking on the high pitched whine of a truly suffering supplicant. "Did any of the elders decide this was a good idea?"

Rydin gestured at the clothing he wore. For the men, the formal clothing included a waist-length tunic and pants, which seemed reasonable until the sleeves were added. The sleeves fell nearly to Dredion and Rydin's knees, and there was a hood attached to the back of each tunic that was never meant to be worn up, but was so long Dredion could feel it touched the base of his tail bone.

"I fear court finery does not suite you nor I, Rydin," Dredion muttered giving his sleeve one last disgusted tug.

Rydin was a little shorter than Dredion, who was one of the tallest of his kin. Rydin's shockingly red hair looked like flames, cropped short and impossible to tame. He used a mixture of flower oils and sap to make it stand up more. Several guard members had been caught pilfering sap from storage to copy him.

Along with the red hair came pale skin and a scattering of freckles across his nose Dredion had seen him get into more than one fight over. Red hair was uncommon among the elves and some whispered, it proved human blood had entered into the Elvin line.

“Maybe, we can petition the oak and yew councils for a change,” Rydin said, turning in a circle with the same disgusted look on his face. A possible taint in his blood had not kept Rydin from earning one of the most honored ranks in the royal gaurd. He was apprenticing directly under the current captain. As Dredion’s bodyguard, even if he was born from a lower tier of the elvin bloodline, he had status.

“Or, we could just have a bonfire on the way home,” he said. “Accidents happen after all.”

Kestra was luckier with her attire. Female elves wore robes that fell to the floor in a simple sweeping design meant to imitate falling water over soft curves. Dredion tried not to notice how Rydin’s gaze kept slithering down Kestra’s curves along the fabric’s current.

“At least I have little reason to wear it,” Rydin said, smiling smugly as he examined his backside in the nearest mirror still somehow managing to keep Kestra’s refelction in sight.

Dredion’s cousin was short, even for a female elf, her head barely crested Rydin’s shoulder. Her hair was a soft brown that she kept shoulder length and had gentle waves in it even when clipped back out of her face. Her hair pins looked like real flowers and if Dredion was reading the crafting right, were made by the newest apprentice of the craft guild. It might have been a gift of favor. By the bland look Rydin gave her while she fiddled with them in the mirror, it seemed he thought so as well.

“I hate to break you of that particular delusion,” Kestra said and turned away from her mirror and blatantly studied Rydin’s backside. Rydin was still obliviously fiddling

with his sleeves. Kestra put a hand on one noticeably curved hip. “Once my cousin completes the aging ceremony, you will be in them quite often,” Kestra teased.

“Why?” Rydin asked. He looked from Dredion to Kestra growing unease clear on his face.

Kestra shrugged and turned back to her reflection to fuss at a few loose strands of hair. Dredion cleared his throat. He’d been planning to let Rydin figure it out the hard way.

“I’ll be expected in council meetings and at all the official functions after winter solstice,” Dredion said and raised his arms so the sleeves would be visible. “These are required.”

“But,” Rydin looked physically pained now. “You’re the prince. I’m just a bodyguard, a lackey. Why would I have to be in court attire?”

“Tradition,” Dredion said softly, but not softly enough that his poor friend could not hear.

“Tradition be damned,” Rydin muttered, eyeing the sleeves as if he could cut them off with his thoughts alone.

Given that both Rydin and Kestra, who were his companions and his guards for this journey, had plenty of magical ability to do so, showed just how much Dredion knew the elders would berate him if he returned with mutilated finery.

“It’s just one night for now and you never know,” Kestra said still preening in her mirror. “Maybe Dredion will be able to change the tradition when he ascends.”

“The king, may the Lady bless his health,” Rydin muttered, “is far from death or retirement, so Dredion won’t be ascending any time soon. It is also not likely the king will fight the elders on this particular point.”

“Or on any points,” Dredion said and immediately wished he had not. The other two turned to look at him, but Dredion was used to hiding the bitterness that spurred such words. “Nevermind,” Dredion said. The others had been with him long enough to recognize his moods and gently turned the conversation to friendlier topics.

“I hope she is resting well,” Kestra said. “I wish we could have just left with her once we arrived.”

Rydin, done tormenting himself with the mirror apparently, went over to the couch and sprawled across its length. He was tall enough that his legs dangled over the arms. One eye still on Kestra.

“She’ll wake up soon,” Rydin said. “I think the human healers have cared for her well and she does look like she needs rest.”

Rydin worried about little, but Dredion had noted many times over the years of training and growing up with him that Rydin had a soft spot for elflings. Rydin was quick to comfort crying elflings with a quick song or by growing them a new vine swing. Kestra’s face was ivory smooth, but Dredion knew she had noticed it as well. Dredion had a feeling that she had been noticing a lot about Rydin lately. Dredion sighed, softly enough that his companions, who were trying so hard not to be noticed noticing each other, didn’t hear. He wished them luck. Traditions in Elvinhome extended into outdated clothing, but were born out of relationships. Rydin’s red hair would suddenly be an entirely new matter then.

“Just remember,” Dredion said, knowing they didn’t need the reminder. “For having such short lives, humans fill a good portion of it observing and relishing rituals and creating rules for themselves to follow. We are not here to do anything other than be welcomed guests.

“Or the king’s showpieces,” Kestra said and glided over to a seat next to Rydin’s couch.

“Seems like a fair enough trade for a Starkin,” Rydin said.

“He’s right, Kestra,” Dredion said. His voice held as much authority as it could in all propriety take when speaking to someone who was already over their aging year. He had yet to even reach his.

Until he turned twenty-five this winter, Dredion was still considered, for all intents and purposes, a child. The only reason he had been allowed out of Elvinhome was not his title as heir, but his status as the only Starkin in Elvinhome. Dredion released a clenched fist and smoothed out the tunic fabric that had been in it. He reached over to the night stand for his gloves. He pulled on the left and then the right, covering the eight-pointed star on the back of his right hand.

“She is a child, an elfling,” Dredion said, turning to Rydin and pinning him with a stern glare before his friend could say anything about Dredion’s age. “She deserves to rest and should certainly not be brought under the scrutiny of an entire court of humans. It would be unkind. I can sense her anywhere in the palace or the city, for that matter.”

The door opened and Kestra’s twin sister, Lyra, stepped in. Lyra bobbed her head to confirm that the elfling slept peacefully. She was afterall protected by the most intricate spells they could devise.

“Alright,” Rydin said jumping up from the couch. “I get the idea. Smile, dance, and relax.”

He came over and clapped Dredion on the shoulder, which had a stiff cap on top.

“If we’re not careful, we might actually find ourselves enjoying this,” he said.

“We’ll be a novelty. There’ve been few of us through here since the return, and I’ve no doubt more than one lady will wish a handsome specimen would stay.”

“I think you’re right,” Kestra said. Her voice took on a musing tone as she turned from helping her sister straighten her curly hair, the only difference between the two of them. She winked at Dredion. “You’d better be careful elfling.”

Dredion laughed and shoved at Rydin, who was playing at being hurt. He deserted Dredion to stand next to Kestra and Lyra while trying, in a bantering way, to ascertain if she really thought Dredion more handsome. Their friendly bickering helped lift his the strange sense of forboding he’d felt since entering the city. Since they crossed through the first gates, he’d felt something a little off about the city, but none of the others had noticed anything strange. Now, he put it off as worry for the Starkin sleeping only a few rooms down.

“His Highness bids you welcome and asks for your presence for dinner,” a servant girl squeaked from behind the closed door leading to their suite. Not many of the serving folk had been brave enough to pass through their doors the few days they had been there. Dredion squared his shoulders and tried to ignore the corresponding sway from his long sleeves.

“Remember to smile,” he said and led the way out the door and into the hallway. He sent a quick prayer up through the nearest stained glass window to the stars, hoping the Lady would speed up the progress of the night.

For about the hundredth time since the three-hour long dinner began ten courses before, Dredion said,

“Yes, your majesty.”

The human monarch, King Antz Darl, sat at the head of a small table raised and separated by thick curtains from the rest of his court. Dredion’s sensitive ears could pick out the speculative murmurs from the otherside as the nobles, who were not used to being separated from the king, pondered the reason.

“You should have seen the size of this buck,” Antz said, stretching out his arms to show the width of the creature’s antlers. Dredion nodded and the king launched into yet another tale of huntsmanship often spurred by drinkmanship. He liked to talk, this king.

King Antz was average height for a human with skin darkened from excessive hunting and bathing in the sea. He was probably only six or seven years Dredion’s senior, something Rydin had been quick to point out. The king still had a full head of brown hair under his crown that needed trimming, but his goatee was well kept. Dredion tried to draw the queen into conversation several times, but realized the poor woman wasn’t naturally so pale. Her sudden plea for permission to withdraw and finish preparations for the ball was followed by a snort from the king.

“She’ll not be the only lady to faint over your presence here tonight,” Antz said and sounded genuinely jealous. He gave Dredion an appraising look and then let his eyes roam acrosss Rydin, Kestra, and Lyra. Luckily his interest in the women was benign.

“It isn’t often I get the opportunity to completely discomfiture my entire court,” King Antz said. “It should be quite a splendid phenomenon to behold.”

“Yes, King Antz, I’m pleased we could be of service after your generosity,” Dredion said, ignoring the nearly audible grind of Rydin’s teeth. Dredion understood, it wasn’t like he appreciated being a toy. Neither did he feel like fighting his way through the king’s considerable army to retrieve the Starkin.

“I wish my heir were old enough to leave the crib,” Antz said, and his eyes grew shrouded and harder to read. “Why is it that your kind have been gone from the world for so long? Even at Dragon Isle your presence is lacking.”

“You’ve been to the Isle your majesty?” he asked. Humans lived there along with the dragons and various other species magical and non. However, it was nearly half a world away from Iman and humans here were forgetting about the presence of elves and dragons.

The king grinned, accepting a glass of wine from one of the mage gaurds doubling as a server for dinner. The king said he didn’t want the servants letting slip the surprise to the gathered nobles.

“Several times I’ve seen the great dome and once had an audience with the Seer.” The king’s eyes turned inward, and Dredion was almost tempted to touch his thoughts, but he was a king and had them well protected.

“That was a humbling experience I don’t imagine I will ever repeat. At least not until my son comes of age. I would like him to see there is more to this world than nobles and gates.”

“The Seer is frightening,” Dredion said, for the first time feeling like they had something in common. “I remember seeing her for the first time. Suffice to say that even the eldest of my kin is in awe of her.”

“Good,” King Antz said, “but that doesn’t quite answer my original question.”

“We value our peace and privacy, majesty,” Dredion said, hoping a portion of the truth would be enough to satisfy the curious monarch.

“I suppose we should be glad for it,” Antz said, swirling the wine in his glass and letting his gaze sink into it. “Few histories remain of the Great War, but I know enough to hope your desire remains peace and privacy.”

There was a warning and a threat within that. Dredion nodded, accepting both. However, he knew that should war erupt again between humans and his kin, the elves would be greatly outnumbered. Dredion raised his glass and tapped it against the king’s. “To peace and privacy.”

“And dancing!” Antz said his smile returning as he turned to the guards. “Have the queen fetched, we’ll gather in the main entrance and enter once the nobles have settled in.”

He turned back to Dredion, who was glad he could stop eating. He felt as if he had gained two stones in one meal. Kestra and Lyra wore identical expressions of distaste subtle enough that only Dredion and Rydin could read it. The two women were such powerful Oeier, earthtenders, they had never been able to eat meat. Rydin, however,

munched on a turkey leg, smiling at the two with greasy lips, which caused them to turn a shade of green.

The King rose, drawing Dredion's attention back to the head of the table. Antz donned a mask with golden feathers that fanned out around his face and didn't so much glitter as glare. Blinking, Dredion smiled and motioned for the young monarch to lead.

Chapter 6

Satani waited at the end of the line of nobles entering the ballroom. She unclasped her cloak and turned to hand it to Gawin. She was expected to wear the cumbersome, itchy fur for the journey from the dining hall to the ballroom. The servants feared at some point between one room and the other she might catch pneumonia from drafts. Since she'd slept on rooftops in winter before, she doubted she need fear sickness, but had accepted the cloak as meekly as a genteel lady would be expected to. She thought she had even managed a convincing shiver in the hallway.

Gawin took it with a sour look. He stood at her back his spine stiff as a metal rod, which seemed only appropriate for a manservant. Satani tried to keep her face neutral, but noticed the wine stain on his tunic had not come out with water. She wondered if he was more angry with the stain or the dozen times she'd sent him to fetch various salts, drinks, and desserts from the kitchens.

"Fetch me a few dances before the midnight bell," Satani said, her words soft.

Gawin looked up at her and for the first time she noticed his face wasn't lined with anger, but something different. She darted a quick look around to be sure no one was close enough to overhear.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Gawin shook his head, his brows still pinched together and his gaze roaming the milling crowd of nobility. If she didn't know better, Satani would have said he looked nervous. Satani felt herself pale and resisted the temptation to draw a dagger.

"Does someone suspect?" she asked so softly. She wasn't sure he even heard since he didn't answer immediately.

“It’s nothing, just a few rumors from the serving quarters,” said Gawin. “The king has mysterious guests he is presenting to the court. No one’s been allowed to meet them yet. It’s strange.”

Satani felt relief sweep through her.

“Then I’ll see you later,” she said and turned away, back to the shuffling crowd. During the dinner she was worried she would hold the fork wrong or do something else to prove herself an imposter. She hadn’t, or the nobles hadn’t noticed anything. It was Satani’s turn to be announced. A fat man in blue livery held a staff with a metal tip at the bottom. He banged it onto the marble floor, but even this and his loud cries barely pierced the roar of the room full of nobles.

Properly announced, Satani stepped forward a few feet and moved to the side, so the stragglers could enter, and she could appreciate the view. The hall was oval with tall arched windows lining walls that looked out over a garden. Satani mused there were too few columns and supports for such a massive roof and guessed magic had been used in the building of it. Along the border of the room was a wide raised area circling the chamber. There were private nooks and other seats clustered together for group chats. Already, these were being claimed by older court members and their retinues. There were tables filled with snacks and drinks as well. The dance floor was lowered. The marble tiles weren’t pure white, but had black speckled throughout.

At the far end of the hall, there was a wide staircase similar to the one she stood on now, except for the two thrones. Satani felt her eyes drawn to the right where massive double doors opened out to a balcony. There was a fountain of a man and woman dancing. The fountain water danced around the confines of the stone basin with magical

dexterity. Magicians were also hard at work creating fireworks overhead. Colorful bursts of light dissipated into harmless sparkles that never touched the nobles.

Satani realized with a start that her presence was being noted. Several heads were turning her way. She had been late for the meal and was guided into an empty seat quickly and without fanfare. With no affiliation with any noble household she sent to herself the mutt table. Young lords and ladies of unsecure background and allegiance ate and verbally sparred for that tidbit of information or leverage they needed to move to a different table at the next ball.

“That’s the one I was telling you about,” a girl she recognized from dinner said. Her half mask was unfortunately not enough to hide the fact she had more front teeth than chin. “She’s from southern Afaw and is not high ranked even within the Uthew clan.”

The woman Beaver was talking to was obviously of a much higher status. Satani could tell simply by the number of ladies and lords clustered around her. Satani turned, pretending to watch a juggler below her and to the right, who was levitating while keeping eight balls in motion. However, she watched the noblewoman from the corner of her eyes. She had a thin stick connected to her mask delicately held between thumb and forefinger with her pinky jutting out stiffly.

“Low ranked, but beautiful,” the woman murmured. Satani was nearly shocked into turning toward them. She almost missed the next part.

“Beauty can be much more valuable than rank,” the woman said, staring through the eye holes of her mask and down the fake beak attached to it at the hapless young noble. Beaver took the hint, curtsied and retired from the noblewoman’s presence, but only after shooting Satani an unfriendly look.

Pretending she didn't hear anything, Satani decided to abandon her spot on the steps. She was too noticeable. She stepped off the last step and made her way through the crowds, careful nobody accidentally stepped on the hem of her dress. Lords and ladies, though mostly lords, were marking her passage with as much curiosity as dignity would permit. Was she walking incorrectly? Had her mask slipped? Satani reached up to pat a loose strand of hair in place, but let her fingers brush the cool exterior of her mask. It was in place and seemed stable. Had she tread on someone's dress?

Her chest uncomfortably tight thanks to the corset, Satani wove her way through the clusters toward the open doors and fountain, where fresh air filtered in. She paused just next to the doors a small cluster of couches where four noblewomen were chatting. The air entering the ball room through the open doors was cool, but not cold. She wasn't sure if the effect was natural or magical, but was thankful for either.

"Would you care for wine m'lady?" a gangly serving man asked, proffering a tray. He was smiling at her, offering a tray with several full goblets. He was just as clearly ogling her breasts. Satani took a glass of red wine, but had no intention of drinking. Then, with all the dignity she'd been taught by the Buzzard, to whom she was now oddly thankful, she waved him away. It was a rude dismissal, the Buzzard had said. The servant's smile certainly did fade fast enough, slipping into a professional mask before he moved on.

She pretended to sip, but she'd had one glass with dinner. Tonight was going to be challenging enough without a cloud over her thoughts. She had just taken another pretend sip when a young nobleman moved toward her, smiling and nurturing his own glass of wine.

“M’lady,” he said and bowed, dark brown hair falling around his face, which was presently half hidden by a wolf mask. “My name is Exayne of the house Ieten.”

Satani’s curtsied, but her heel slipped, making what should have been a graceful dip slightly uneven. The lord either didn’t notice or didn’t care, for he straightened and waited expectantly, mouth quirked in a friendly smile.

“M’lord,” she said, hoping her voice came off as soft and demure and not nervous. “I’m called Satani of the house Afaw and Utwen.”

Kamen said there was no reason to change her given name, since it was elegant sounding, though the meaning would have given the nobles pause. She gave a fake paternal and maternal household as was proper for a woman of marriageable age. The Buzzard said this was so the nobility could dissect the two lineages to decide whether or not there would be any benefits in forming an alliance through her. Exayne might have been dissecting the pros and cons of her heritage, but he did it quickly between her introduction and his invitation to dance.

“It would be an honor if you would grace me with your first dance,” Exayne said. “You’re new to court, and I would hope to make the transition as easy and enjoyable as possible.”

Satani knew she would have to dance, but hadn’t thought it would be so soon. The musicians, she could hear, were just starting.

“It would be my pleasure,” she said.

Exayne motioned a servant over setting first his empty glass then her full one on the tray. She took the arm he offered so he could lead her to the dance floor. Satani would

have been nervous, but between the invitation to dance and the first steps there wasn't really time.

It was one of the new waltzes. Buzzard had not been complimentary about much, but she had said Satani was a natural dancer. The old woman had told her all dances were a pattern, and if you kept the pattern in the back of your mind it was easy. She was right.

Exayne took her right hand in his and led her in the first steps. Satani's muscles untensed, stretching out in anticipation of the dance. The steps seemed easy, and she had no trouble keeping up with the weave of couples. She was fascinated by her dress and how it moved both with her and around her. She felt like a cloud, a graceful cloud.

"Your dancing is impressive," Exayne said. He bowed again, and she bobbed a return curtsy without slipping. He was grinning at her, a perfect expression to go with his mask.

"No wonder so many have been watching you," he said. "You move so gracefully."

Satani flushed, gave an embarrassed nod. Exayne led her from the dance floor and opened his mouth to say something, but not before another lord stepped into their path.

"Exayne, you've found a treasure I see," the lord was older and wore the mask of a fool, but she could tell by their similar heights, hair and chins that the two were closely related.

"Yes, father," Exayne said. His smile this time seemed brittle.

"May I beg you for the next dance?" Exayne's father asked.

Satani looked to Exayne, who hesitantly, but with one final not-quite smile handed her over to his father. He did promise to search for her hand in another song.

From then on, she almost didn't get a chance to stop dancing between partners. Young and old alike swept her from one song to the next until names and houses were fairly pouring from her ears. She found it was perfectly acceptable to just smile and let them lead the dance as well as the conversation. In fact, it pleased them no end. A noble, barely old enough to be off the apron strings, told her she was the most congenial partner he'd ever had, a compliment only slightly marred by the fact he had stumbled over the word congenial.

Satani no longer nervously checked her mask. She was in a crowd of thousands and was being sought after for conversation. At first all she had wanted to do was hide, find the nearest fold of shadows and disappear, but there were few shadows in the ballroom blazing with magic and noise. However, when the 30th servant inquired about her wellbeing asking if she were too cold or too hot, Satani realized she was just as hidden here as she would be on a roof top in any other part of the city. No one could see through her mask and so far no one had given signs that she had said or done anything wrong. She no longer felt nervous, in fact she had a strange feeling in her chest, almost like happiness, when the gentlemen kept asking to dance or refresh her drink. She completed her dance with an older gentleman, Lord Shackly of the house Yvean, who wore the silver sash that designated him as a High Lord.

"Teran is a sweet lad, loves horses, but couldn't spell his way out of a box," Lord Shackly said. He had been telling her about an impressively large list of single grandsons when there was a blare of trumpets.

“Let us clear the way dear,” Lord Shackly said offering his arm. Satani accepted it with a smile. She was slightly out of breath. The corset made breathing while dancing an exercise in will power.

“Thank you,” she murmured as they reached the edge of the crowd and turned for the king’s entrance. The nobles were creating a clear path from the entrance stairs to the dias that held the thrones. Satani and her escort fell somewhere in the middle of the line. The ringlets touching her face were slightly damp with sweat moving in a breeze coming in from the patio behind them.

While the trumpets blared and the announcer, who had drawn himself up as tall as he could, which was barely to most gentlemen’s waists commenced to prove that height had nothing to do with lung capacity. He named off the king and queen’s titles in one long breath. Satani let herself be distracted by the magical wards woven throughout the room. She’d seen the monarchs many times during processions as well as during rare ceremonies held throughout in the city, but there might be similar protective wards woven in the windows and walls here that she’d face in the hallways later.

She registered the fact the mysterious dignitaries were being heralded as well in the back of her mind. The nasal voice of the announcer called out foreign names and titles, but she was still engrossed in the wards. Several were quite clever. She was trying to memorize one when she felt a gentle nudge.

“The King and Queen my dear,” Lord Shackly said, tugging her arm gently until she dipped into a deep curtsy mirroring the rest of the women whose knees were nearly touching the floor. The noblemen bowed their heads and shoulders in varying depths according to their rank. It was only after the King and Queen had passed that Satani

glanced up. She froze in mid-rise. Her breath caught in her throat and suddenly it seemed all the blood in her body was roaring with increasing in strength in her ears.

The four dignitaries glided past, two men and two women, but they did not wear masks. Satani's eyes were riveted to long and sharply pointed ears sticking out boldly from beneath one of the women's curls. Satani's eyes darted to the young man in front with spiky red hair, who had his ears completely revealed. Her eyes jumped to another, the one in front with black hair kept in a tight ponytail. Blue eyes roamed across the width and breadth of the ballroom across the stunned gathering of nobles. As they swept over Satani she saw that they were slit, like a cats, like her own.

"Steady now, young one," Lord Shackly said his voice layered with amusement and concern.

He caught her as she fell. Her legs no longer seemed able to support her weight. The procession was already at the dais, and nobles were brushing by her to get closer. Shackley called over a servant, who helped lift her to her feet. She managed to support her weight, but followed Shackly as he directed her to the nearest bench.

"Bring water and a fan," Shackley ordered. He turned back to Satani with soothing tones. "It's alright dear, they are harmless."

Satani tried to say something. Anything would have been appropriate, but she couldn't find her words. She could see the four figures standing on the dais, halfway across the room, but couldn't see them as clearly. Maybe she had imagined it.

"Did," she croaked, then stopped to wet her mouth and started again. "Did they have pointed ears? Eyes with slit pupils?"

Shakley was accepting water from the servant and directing him to use the fan for Satani's benefit. He sat down on the bench next to her and watched her take a sip of water.

"Don't fret," he said, nodding approvingly when she emptied the cup. "They be not demons, though they may look it. Gentle folk are elves, nowadays anyway. I've had some dealings with them in my youth in his majesty's father's navy."

Satani knew the part of her face that could be seen was as pasty as her porcelain mask. She struggled to reestablish control of her expression and limbs. Shakley rubbed his mustache muttering about delicate young ladies. Satani noticed she wasn't the only "delicate lady" to be so affected. In fact, several had yet to be revived from dead faints.

"Elves?" she asked, picking the word out of Lord Shakley's mutterings. "They aren't humans with birth deformities?" she asked. She wasn't sure how successfully she hid the quiver in her voice. Lord Shackly shook his head with a gentle and encouraging smile.

"No, little one," he said. "No human would be born that way. Those that did would have elvin blood in them. They are an entirely different race and were known by man for many and more generations than you can imagine. The amnesia toward their existence is rather new."

Satani's stomach churned. She could still feel the bruises under the fine material of the dress, where she had been pelted with rotten fruit and rocks by people on the streets of the city. Some had cursed her for her deformities and threw fruit and vegetables while others called them demon marks. Those later were the ones that had thrown rocks.

Years of honing her ability to close off all emotion and focus only on the task at hand finally kicked in over the tremendous shock. A few deep steadying breaths and she was able to turn back to Lord Shakly with a smile as genuine as she had ever given anyone.

“M’lord, you’ve been kind,” she said, “but I fear I am distracting you from the music and company. If you would please leave me to recover a few moments and regain my bearings, I would be pleased to dance with you again at a later song.”

Satani decided he was a kind old man when he simply nodded, patting her on the hand affably before moving away to a clump of other High Lords, who welcomed him eagerly. Satani could hear all the whispered conversations nearest her and worked to block out the words, demon and elves. Satani waved over a servant and secured herself a glass of wine. She took some non-pretend sips until the glass was empty. The servant goggled at her when she set the empty glass back down on his tray and picked up another. She wandered away toward the entrance of the ballroom, determined to put as much distance between herself and the King’s dias as possible. After finishing her second glass and reaching for a third, the sharp edges in her mind were greatly dulled, a cloud over her thoughts was suddenly welcome.

Chapter 7

Dredion couldn't hide his awe at his first sight of the ballroom. He'd been in many palaces which were older and more spectacular. However, the architecture in the new portion of King Antz's palace was a fascinating, blend of magic and man. If he looked closely enough, he could see some binding spells woven within the stone itself. He wondered if it was a similar method to what the dragons used when singing stone? If the elders would let them experiment a little more at elvinhome, he might be able to replicate it.

King Antz must have noticed how intently Dredion studied the lines of power. The king himself had little magic, even for a human, but could see the magic as could everyone with the spark.

"You're interested in architecture?" the King asked.

Dredion nodded, just as straight forward.

"I would have studied stone masonry on Dragon Isle with the stone singers had I the opportunity," he said. It wasn't often he admitted it. Not many, even in his own retinue, would have guessed it of him.

"An honor few have a chance to take," the king said. He pursed his lips, still studying Dredion, but nodding to the room at large. "One of my mages has had just such an honor. I could arrange for him to meet with you. Should you desire it."

Dredion bit his lip to keep himself from answering rashly. He was here for Starkin not stone.

"If there is time," he said.

The music started up again and Dredion found that he liked it. The abrupt chords were different from the almost ponderous tones heard in Elvinhome. This was more active, frenetic even.

Dredion looked at Kestra and Lyra, who were standing together watching the nobles watch them. Their sweet smiles seemed to be disarming the fears of many of the braver gentlemen below. So much so, they looked like they would like to approach the two. Rydin had reached a similar conclusion and stood like a shadow behind the twins, his height giving the nobles a clear look at his expression as well. His smile wasn't nearly as friendly, and the noblemen wisely noticed.

Well, that wouldn't do, Dredion thought. If they were here to show themselves off, then they might as well leave the humans with a good impression. Contacts were something to be cultivated not culled through tactless glaring.

"Would it be acceptable if we were to dance?" Dredion asked the king, bowing in his seat. "The music is inviting."

"Please, enjoy," The king said, waving him forward. He paused and took up his wife's hand. "In fact, we'll join you."

The entire court stopped to watch the king descend from his throne with queen and novelty guests in tow. Then there was a rush to find partners and get as close to the new dignitaries as possible. Dredion held Lyra's hand in a gentle, friendly grip as jostling died down and music began. For such energetic music, the movements were simple, but enjoyable. It just felt good to move around after the heavy meal and sitting through endless hunting stories.

“You look tired cousin,” Lyra said her lips hardly moving over the words. The thoughts she brushed against Dredion’s mind held a deeper level of concern. He ignored both verbal and mental signs of worrying. They met in the center of two lines of nobles and were expected to saunter down to the end.

“I’m just ready to exercise off all the duck I ate,” he said and felt sorry when her mental touch grew prickly with anger as well as vaguely green.

However, she laughed as they reached the end of the row. She moved left and he to the right. Kestra and Rydin stepped by. Dredion noticed human dances focused on touching as little as possible, while still being completely interwoven in thought and step. Kestra and Rydin were one as they moved, as connected through that handhold as two knitted souls. Dredion was so distracted by the stark honesty of the realization he missed the next turn.

“I fear for them too,” Lyra said, passing under his arm and turning with a small curtsy, “but it will be as the Lady wills it.”

“As the Lady wills,” he responded automatically, but he believed it. He was probably one of the few left who did.

The song ended with everyone standing where they had been before. This time, the King offered his wife’s sweaty hand to Dredion, and took Lyra’s hand instead. Then Dredion danced with Kestra followed by several of the braver noblewomen. All were curious, firing off questions as quickly as the steps would allow.

“Do you have houses or live in trees?” one asked, while another wanted to know if they ate their meat raw because long ears and eyes with oval pupils naturally led to such an assumption. Dredion answered the questions that were not too prying while

studying the room. His eyes were drawn during his eighth dance to a figure in hunter green, who was led onto the dance floor by an older gentlemen with a silver sash of rank.

Dredion was only a few couples down and the noblewoman's back was to him. He watched the entrancing way she moved as the dance began. She stepped as lithly through the dances as Kestra and Lyra placing her feet in time with the music as if she'd been born following the patterns.

"Who is that?" Dredion asked his current partner, an older noblewoman, who was so short, Dredion was having trouble not tripping over her.

"Who dear?" she asked and blushed at having used the endearment. When Dredion didn't seem offended, she turned to follow his gaze.

"Oh, well, she's new to court, just this evening," she said. "She is from a minor household. Not an heir, but beautiful. It was a smart move by her family. She will marry high with that waist line and those pretty tresses. As long as she doesn't have a wart on her nose, she'll be set."

Dredion laughed as the noble lady chuckled. However, he kept one eye on the young dancer. At one point he and his partner turned so closely to her that her skirts brushed his leg. He managed to catch a quick look at her face. He was grateful the music ended just then because he came to such a sudden stop nearly tripping his partner. He had to apologize as he led her off the dance floor. Instead of finding another partner immediately, Dredion accepted a glass of wine to give himself time to think. The dancer was wearing a simplemask by most standards for this particular court, but the design on the forehead caught his attention. Two stars intertwined to form eight-points, the sign of a Starkin and of the Lady.

Why would a human wear such a symbol? He decided to find out.

Satani had taken as much of a break from the dancing as she dared. She'd decided after having one conversation with Lord Shackley, where she understood one of every three references, dancing was much safer. She had less chance of being discovered. By her calculations she still had two hours until midnight.

This was nothing, Satnani told herself sternly. She could handle her shock until she could get back to the guild. Kamen would find out what was going on. As long as she finished successfully, he'd help her find out what and who the elves were. Deciding she might attract more conversation if she remained sitting, Satani stood and accepted the next dance offer.

The King and Queen had left the dance floor already. More names and faces and platitudes ran together in a wearisome stream. She curtsied to the next partner mostly without looking and reached to take his hand. A tingling shock traveled up her arm, to her spine and from there to every other part of her body.

Satani looked up into the eyes of one of the King's guests, the demon -- elf. He was smiling at her with bright blue eyes shining and black hair unable to cover the tips of his ears, which were flushed. Satani raised a hand to pat her hair; her own ears burned beneath the curls.

"May I have this dance?" he asked. His gentle voice rumbled under the court's chatter as the next song began.

"I'm known as Dredion Nistrol et Starkin. What may I call you?" He spoke the common tongue clearly and fluidly but with lilts and dips that were unusual, but

naggingly familiar. Satani made a shaky curtsy, but she had to work her lips before words unlodged.

“Satani,” she finally managed to say, if breathlessly, and hurriedly continued when he frowned. “Satani of the house Afaw and Utwen.” She flushed and tried to hide her chest with her free hand. He didn’t look down.

“Satani, an unusual name,” he said as the steps began.

They had no more time for talking, someone requested a song that the nobles insisted was suitable for court, but Satani had heard it played in taverns. She followed the pattern instinctively flanked on one side by an elvin couple and on the other by an elvin woman and a young nobleman. There weren’t as many nobles in line for this dance, but the rest were on the sidelines watching and gossiping.

Her partner didn’t seem bothered by the attention, but Satani felt it as a heavy weight on her shoulders. They danced and Dredion wove and spun through the complex steps and tight spaces as if he had been born at court. Satani was pleased to find that unlike some of the younger nobles she’d dance with, he knew just how much was too much energy when spinning her away and toward him. They matched each other’s pace perfectly, as if they had been born stepping together.

They were holding their hands high, only finger tips touching to form an arch for others to pass under when he smiled at her and Satani was surprised to find herself smiling back.

“You dance well,” he said while guiding her through the last steps and then into two more additional dances before drawing her to the side of the dance floor. His elvin

companions continued to dance and other nobles moved aside respectfully as he led her to refreshments.

He retrieved them both a goblet of sweet juice. Satani was thankful. Her head was buzzing uncomfortably.

“Satani is a unique name.” He sipped his drink watching her with those unnerving eyes over the lip of the goblet. Satani wondered if her own eyes caused other people’s stomachs to flip in a similar fashion.

“It was something my mother heard in a story,” Satani said, not having to pause for improvisation. “She said it sounded elegant.” She could still hear Kamen’s voice as he thought of a name for her. He had looked at her with such intensity when he smiled it wasn’t friendly and neither was the name, elegant sounding or not.

“Do you know what it means?” Dredion asked.

Satani looked at him warily. Did he know what it meant? Or was he just curious? After months living on her own and nearly starving to death in the city before she was dragged before Kamen, Satani supposed she really must have looked like a demon. He said he knew a language long dead in these parts where the word Satani meant small demon. She doubted it would be wise to share that particular meaning with him.

“If it has meaning, it’s nothing I’ve learned,” she said shrugging, “but my mother is excessively fond of it.”

He nodded and seemed satisfied, until his gaze wondered up to the top of her mask. His face froze around a thought he looked hesitant to voice.

“Your mask is unusual as well,” he said. He reached out a hand and brushed her forehead, where the star would rest. When he stood so close, she realised just how tall he

was, the crown of her head would fit under his chin. It would be difficult to fight him. He smelled different too, fresher than the other nobles somehow. If smell were a color, she would have said he was green.

“Ah, this?” Satani brushed the shell of her disguise, feeling the raised pattern of the star. “Another flight of fancy for my mother. She said it would bring me luck, make me the brightest star at court M’lord. I fear she’s rather a romantic.”

Dredion laughed and Satani joined him, relieved he sipped his juice again, which reminded her to taste her own. It was too tangy, but cool.

“I think it is safe to say you are the brightest star in this gathering,” Dredion said before taking her drink and setting it aside before leading her by the hand back to the dance floor.

Satani lost track of the steps, blood pounding in her ears and her stomach flipping end over end as they moved. For over a candle mark Dredion kept her as his partner. The part of Satani currently masquerading as a noblewoman was enjoying his presence and dances. However, she had lived on the streets too long not to be suspicious of why he kept her near. Satani took careful note of his movements just in case they did have to fight.

Finally, the song ended and her muscles ached. Dredion led her off the dance floor, but didn’t stop at the edge. He took her past the window seats and through the double doors to the fountain where water was still dancing unnaturally.

Fresh air, slightly more chilly than inside frolicked among the late blooming flowers lining the paths. Trails led out from the fountain into the hedges and darkness of the garden beyond. Dredion took her no farther than the fountain, but a little to the side

where they could not be easily seen and where the sound of water could cover their conversation.

Satani was still on a high from the wine, music, and dancing. She didn't stop to think, but gave into her curiosity. Hesitantly at first, but with gathering courage when he voiced no objections, Satani reached out a hand and trailed her fingers from the tip of his ear to its lobe. It was warm.

She pulled her hand away, feeling her own ears grow warm underneath her hair. It wasn't some trick. They were real. He was watching her, hadn't moved when Satani reached out. Now he did. He lifted his own hand, trailing it up the length of her neck, his fingers brushing her chin, her lips and finally tracing the edge of the mask. His dexterous fingers found the lowest hook and snapped it free, his disturbing eyes never leaving hers.

Whatever spell had been woven around her, shattered like light over the rippling fountain water. Satani cried out pushing him backward. He did not stumble or even really move, but he dropped his hand and did not try to touch her mask again. Satani reattached the hook with shaking hands.

"I apologize, I did not intend to frighten you," Dredion said, his voice low and soothing. Satani stared around, trying to understand why she had let herself be led out into the garden. What time was it? How long did she have left? She turned toward the main hall, but a gentle grip on her arm held her in place.

"I fear I've offended you," Dredion said. "Tell me how to amend my error." He looked sincere, but Satani knew what would have happened. If he'd taken off her mask, sincerity would shrivel as surely as her face had around the scar. He might have her eyes and ears, but she was still the demon of the two.

Satani was saved from answering by the timely arrival of Gawin. He stood in the doorway and bowed. He was staring at Dredion hard, and she had never seen his face so clear of emotion. Satani shrugged of the elf's hand and let herself wilt.

"I fear I've overtaxed myself this evening," Satani said and didn't have to fake weariness in her voice. "I hope your lordship will forgive me and allow me to retire to the healers' quarters for rest. He nodded and presented his arm, but Satani backed away.

"No my lord, you are a special guest," she said and he dropped the arm. "Enjoy yourself. I will have my attendant guide me. Good evenng."

She turned and with steps too hurried to be lady-like, followed Gawin back into the bright wash of light and sound. She was assaulted by the musty odor of sweaty bodies and perfume. She must have turned a convincing shade of green because the noblewoman Beaver had addressed earlier tisked.

"What a brave soul that child is, no wonder she feels ill," she said. "Spinning and turning with demons so, who knows what ills they've wrought on her."

Satani followed Gawin through the bright costumed clusters, wondering the exact same thing.

Chapter 8

Gawin ushered her out of the grand hall like he was a loyal servant worried for his mistress' well being. However, as soon as they passed into the dimmer shadows of lesser hallways and made half a dozen turns and sounds from the ballroom were cut to a dim murmur, he turned on her. The concerned servant lifted his hand as if to hit her. She didn't move, and he dropped his hand to his side, balling it into a fist.

"How dare you?" Gawin said, so angry his neck vein wasn't so much pulsing as it was furiously battering against the confines of his skin. "You should have kept your distance from him!"

Satani was shocked by the ferocity of his words and demeanor. Satani's her ears were on fire with indignation, and she itched to be holding a weapon.

"We don't have time for this," she hissed. The castle's gigantic bell tolled the first chord of midnight, emphasizing her words.

Gawin cursed, but turned and began to run. Satani followed closely on his heels keeping her skirts raised and trying to regulate her breathing. It wasn't long before her chest was hurting from the running, and she realized that the dancing and stress took more out of her than she'd anticipated. Or her corset had tightened from all the wine she drank.

"This way," Gawin said when they came to a split in the hallway. Satani stumbled over her own feet as they increased their speed. To keep from falling, she had to draw on her magic. She would have the strength she needed, though she would pay for taxing herself so much over the next few days. She would deal with the consequences later. Right now, she just had to keep up.

She let her senses ghost down the hallway, feeling for alarms and traps. Gawin did not argue when she motioned him to stop while she disarmed a spell or two. It did not take but two more shivering bell tolls to reach their destination. Satani peeked around the final corner, toward the room holding their target. She was shocked to find no guards. Gawin did not seem concerned by the lack, shoving his way past her. Apparently, whatever was in the room was important enough the king didn't want to let anyone know there was something worth guarding. She padded closer and realized magical wards were set with such care only the most experienced mage would recognize how tricky and strong they actually were.

"Be still and don't interrupt me," Satani said softly. The fifth bell chimed. Sweat trickled down her neck. She had to be careful. She took one more bell toll to study the magical puzzle. The protective spell was like an upside down bowl over the room. If they had time, they could have come up from below, but there were only a few precious minutes left before the gate that was their only escape route became the bars of their cage.

The ward was woven with threads of magic so tightly she couldn't unwind it or somehow expand a hole within it without setting off an alarm. She dismissed all options but one as improbable for success. She had to take control of the ward--at least part of it. When she was certain she knew the ward's pattern by heart, she used her power to replicated it, building a section of ward the size of the door. It took only seconds to complete, but the eighth bell had already sounded. Satani held her breath and quicker than a pin prick, she slipped her construction into the ward. Even her eye could see no

difference, but she could feel the ward now as part of herself. She flexed her control over the section, creating an opening the size of the door for Gawin.

“Go,” she said.

Gawin didn’t hesitate. He entered the room closing the door behind him. Satani was sure a mouse would have been startled by his presence because she heard nothing. She exhaled only when he came out carrying a carpet wrapped burden over his shoulder. A person then. A small one if the size of the rug was any indication. Satani didn’t state the obvious as the ninth toll sounded, but motioned urgently. She ran down the hallway, adjusting the map in her head to find the quickest path out. She sprinted down four flights of steps into a servant’s hallway leading to a garden entrance. The tenth toll. Satani stepped into the middle of a moonlit garden, treading on the dying stalks of vegetable plants. The hairs at the base of her neck were tingling, a sensation she always equated with trouble. They’d been discovered. She sent out her senses and felt them, whoever they were, approaching—fast.

“They know!” she shouted back at Gawin, not caring how loud she was.

Not questioning how she knew or how they had found out, Gawin sprinted through the garden, his steps so light he left no impression on the grass. Satani lifted her heavy skirts nearly to her knees to keep up. She couldn’t figure it out. They hadn’t tripped any wards. How had they been discovered? The eleventh bell tolled as they rounded the final curve of the garden and outer wall to the gate they needed. Satani felt the storm break, as their pursuers came into magical range.

Faster than she had ever done before, Satani wrapped a protective ward around herself and Gawin. He was at the gate with his awkward bundle. Her magic would keep

out any magical and most physical attacks as long as she could hold it. She saw a small group sprinting toward them, but the mixtrue of their attack spells bursting against her protective one caused the air to sizzle and crackle with lightning. She couldn't make out much of who was attacking. They were strong though and she was outnumbered.

“Hurry!” Satani yelled, standing her ground and facing the rush of figures, pouring more energy into the shield and trying to adjust it to their attacks. Gawin pulled open the gate as the final bell toll sounded.

Satani backed up carefully and at the last second turned to follow. She saw the corner of Gawin's malicious grin as he shut the door in her face. The bell shivered into silence before she could reopen it. She felt the spell surrounding the palace snap across the door like a chocker. It was too strong. She couldn't break through alone. Satani spun toward her attackers, putting everything she had left into her shield. She felt the strike coming, stronger than one person should be able to use, but definitely coming from the shadowed figure in front.

The attack crumbled her shield as if it were constructed from children's blocks. The backlash of her spell struck Satani like a fist in the stomach. On top of that, a dozen other spells to capture and contain overwhelmed her. The combined energies thrust back into the city's wall. Her head cracked against stone and darkness swept over her more quickly than any spell could subdue her.

Dredion watched the human girl flit back into the bright ballroom with a frown. What was wrong with him? He reentered the overly bright, loud, and smelly room soon after and met Rydin, who had been sent to find him by the others.

“And you thought you wouldn’t enjoy yourself,” he said, slapping Dredion on the shoulder. “I’ve never seen you so captivated.”

When Dredion did not say anything in response, but continued to stare at the hallway she’d exited through, his expression turned to concern.

“What’s wrong, do you feel unwell?” he asked, his green eyes searching Dredion as if there might be a physical wound. He was in charge of Dredion’s safety, a charge both he and the elders took seriously. Dredion smiled at the thought of his uncle, the king’s, wrath should Dredion be injured. It was no wonder that Rydin looked on the verge of panic.

“I’m fine,” Dredion assured him, “but there was something strange about her. Did you see her dancing?”

“She’s a skilled dancer,” Rydin said nodding and he waved a hand to include the mass of color and sound in the ballroom. “Humans are not without talents, Dredion. Now let’s return. I fear the king has another story to tell. This one seems to be about a grizzly bear. Poor Lyra looks ready to spit him on his own spear. You should probably stop her. As I understand it, killing kings is not an encouraged practice in these parts.”

Dredion gave the hallway a final look and followed Rydin. He opened his mouth to comment on grizzly bears, when it happened. He froze, his every sense tingling as the little bundle in his thoughts that represented the Starkin’s presence in the castle did something it shouldn’t be doing — it moved. How could she move? She was drugged and

wasn't expected to awaken for hours yet. It wasn't just moving a little, but was quickly increasing the distance between herself and the ballroom.

"Someone has the Starkin," Dredion said, running through the crowd, with little concern for who he pushed aside.

Someone has the Starkin, Dredion repeated, sending his frantic mental warning to the others. Lyra and Kestra ran from the king's dais, already heading toward the servant's hallway, one of the quickest routes to the Starkin's hiding place. There were shrieks of fear from the nobles when Kestra flipped over the head of a particularly slow old man rather than shove him aside. The king was shouting, demanding an explanation. Guards bristled like dogs with raised hackles. Dredion was almost to the hallway himself with Rydin on his heels.

Calm the King, he ordered Rydin, who broke off immediately. *Have him send his mages quickly.*

Kestra and Lyra were waiting in the hallway and slipped in behind him as he darted past. Their feet made no sound on the marble.

Protect the Starkin and capture everyone else. Don't kill unless absolutely necessary. We need to know who as well as why. They gave mental nods to affirm they understood.

He could feel the Starkin's presence easily. He had memorized the layout of the palace and quickly plotted a route for cutting off the kidnappers before they could breach the wall. Remembering the sailor's words from a few nights before, Dredion cursed himself for a fool. He should have been more careful. Someone else was after the child and was using the ball as a distraction to spirit her away.

The King's mages follow with me, came Rydin's silent assurance. Dredion did not care how closely they followed, there was no time to wait. He led the others through the maze of hallways to find the door he was looking for. The servant's entrance opened to gardens, the two acres devoted to feeding the massive amount of personnel it took to keep the palace running.

Whoever had taken the Starkin was heading for one of the small produce gate. Wards set by the mages were supposed to form an unbroken ring around the palace along the length of the wall. However, this particular gate was somehow disconnected from the spell. Anyone or anything could leave through that door. Silence shattered as they rounded the last curve of the castle wall and came into sight of the gate. Two shadows were only steps away from freedom. One wore a dress and the other was male carrying a bundle over one shoulder. Dredion lashed out with the only thing that could reach them at this distance, sending a forceful attack focused on stunning the two. He felt the others do the same. Their attacks shattered harmlessly against a shield.

Dredion skidded to a halt before he ran into the barrier. The mingling of magic was so confusing and powerful, he could no longer see the kidnappers nor could he distinguish whose power was whose. However, he did hear a voice yell something and then the presence of the Starkin passed to the other side of the wall. He felt her being carried away from the walls. Dredion growled in frustration and gathered all his determination in the form of power. One attack with the brunt of his star-fed magic and the shield cracked and crumbled. He could feel the sizable backlash snap into the mage.

Dredion, Kestra, Lyra, and perhaps a few other mages from the king's reinforcements had rounded the corner, sent containing spells toward the female

kidnapper all at the same time. The stranger was shoved against the palace walls by the force of it, her considerable powers cut off and the courtyard fell into silence. It took a moment before his eyes could adjust to the semi darkness after so much magical light. When they did, he stared at the figure pinned to the wall. Her head lolled to the side, blonde hair falling in thick chaotic curls partially covering the star pattern on her mask.

A surprised exclamation from Rydin, broke through Dredion's shock. He turned to find two dozen, black-clad figures, led by Rydin, standing nearby their eyes flaring with magic. Kestra, Lyra, and Rydin were staring at the unconscious figure with just as much confusion as Dredion felt.

"Where is the Starkin?" Rydin asked, jumping to the most important issue. Dredion did the same, shoving his anger and questions aside. He quickly created and tied off a shield around the powerful young noblewoman to contain her should she wake. Another elf's spell kept her pinned to the wall. He thought it might be Kestra's.

"We've got to get to the other side. I can't feel what direction they are taking from behind these wards." Dredon said. Without asking permission, he bored a hole through the shield. It was not an easy task, since the palace walls were protected by spells woven by many humans working together. He heard a gasp from the mages behind as he created the hole in their carefully wrought shield and smashed the gate open at the same time.

"Bring her," he ordered, motioning toward the unconscious figure. He stepped through to the other side of the wards and into a small quartyard in the shadows of the palace wall. He let out a relieved sigh, when immediately he could tell what direction the

Starkin was being taken. Her presence tugged at him like a piece of metal to a magnet. East, toward the docks.

“Where?” Rydin asked, shifting the bulk of the unconscious noblewoman on his shoulder. Dredion didn’t trust himself to speak, his anger chocking off the words.

They’ve taken her to the docks. I’ll build a star’s path, but bring her, just in case.
he thought at them.

“Everyone gather together!” Kestra ordered, herding the palace mages into a tight circle around Dredion. Rydin stood at Dredion’s side, so close that the kidnapper’s hair was touching his shoulder.

He ignored it and let his thoughts drift upward dipping into the energies of the stars above. The lights of the city made the ones here seem dim and aloof, but to Dredion it felt as if they were close enough to touch. Close enough that he could drink their light and power, so that his body surged with the same energies that warped through their massive bodies. It was his birthright to be able to tap into this power, to follow the star paths and move faster than thought, faster than light.

One moment the street was full of mages and elves with bodies tensed and ready to spring into movement. The next, a flash of light and a sound beyond human hearing sent shivers through the courtyard’s cobblestones and left only quickly dissipating star light behind.

Chapter 9

Dredion blinked and his body and those of the others surrounding him in a shaking huddle were once again separate from the celestial clockwork. His body returned to the natural world as lightly as a leaf petal settling on pond water. Unfortunately for him, this pond was fairly roiling with magical waves.

Dredion looked around. He was standing in the middle of a nearly empty dock. Only two four-masted ships grumbled woodenly as they slumbered in moorings. There appeared to be no one on board. He turned to those that he'd brought from the palace. Nearly two dozen of the king's mages, bristled with both magic and metal, ready to face anything. He waved a hand ordering half to fan out to the left and the other half to his right. They did as he ordered silently and with no questions. Dredion, Kestra, Lyra, and Rydin, who was still carrying his burden, stood at the center of the line. Dredion let his senses spread out and felt the Starkin ahead, in the shadows cast by the largest of the two ships.

"There," he said softly and pointed. He stepped forward and the others followed, moving in a solid line toward shadows too thick to be natural. Darkness had never been a problem for elves, but even Dredion's eyes could not pierce this murk.

Dredion felt something off. He stopped and the others mirrored him. There was plenty of magic in the air, some of it from the king's men, some of it from his elvin companions and even more of it coming from whoever was hiding in the darkness. However, someone was drawing on starlight, which only a Starkin could do. It wasn't Dredion and it couldn't be the child, who didn't look old enough to have even touched her powers for the first time. There was another Starkin on the dock, one who was adept

enough in his powers to hide his presence from Dredion, which was no easy feat. He tried to warn the others, but before he could a voice and a figure emerged from the darkness. Dredion shuddered uncontrollably as twenty years of hatred for the figure who stood before him rose into a pool in his stomach.

“Dredion,” Kamen said. “It’s been a long time. You’ve grown. What draws a Starkin and the heir to this humble muck of humanity?”

Dredion couldn’t take his eyes off Kamen. He hadn’t changed. He still had the dragon scale earring, the same grin and cold steel eyes. It was as Dredion was fighting the fear that rose inside him at this gaze that he noticed. Kamen was disguised as a human, his pupils rounded by magic and his ears blunted. Dredion just barely managed to force away the last image he had of Kamen. Kamen had seemed much taller then, but Dredion had only been ten years old and Kamen had been leering down at him, where he lay on the ground in his mother’s arms, which had been growing chiller by the minute as her life’s blood left her. Behind Kamen he could feel the young starkin and from the shadows stepped forward another figure, the other kidnapper Dredion presumed, who still carried his burden. He looked familiar, but Dredion couldn’t quite place him.

“Kamen,” Dredion said softly and could hear Kestra, Lyra and Rydin draw in sharp breaths. Then the sound of steel being drawn from sheaths. Now they understood who they faced. Everyone’s weapons both magical and physical were now trained on the dangerous legend that had stepped so arrogantly from the past and shadows.

“I don’t know why you’re here Kamen,” Dredion said, keeping his magic around him in a tightly controled malestrome, though he desired to strike out. “I’ll not let you harm another Starkin.”

He had forced his tone to be calm, but Kamen saw through it. He smiled, a slow, assured split of the lips that held no humor, but an excess of loathing.

“You think to stop me elfling? You?” Kamen laughed a little and shook his head. “Dredion, child of Yehr and Wwen. You weary me youngling. Return to Elvin home where the elders can wipe the drool from your chin. You have no right to even be out of your crib, let alone threatening me.”

Dredion’s anger flared and he almost couldn’t keep hold of his magic, which wanted desperately to respond to his emotions. He had to be careful. The Starkin was behind Kamen.

“My place is right here,” Dredion said. “I’m certainly old enough to understand how far you’ve fallen in pride. Disguised as a human.”

Dredion must have hit a sour spot, because Kamen lashed out with an attack of magic that burned the air with fire between them. It was uninventive, but powerful. Dredion would normally have side stepped the brunt of it, but if he did then the others beside him would have been struck, a fact Kamen was well aware of. Dredion stood square in the fire’s path, his physical body and magical shields braced for the blow.

His shield held, but the force threw Dredion backward so that he landed at Rydin’s feet, who hastily sat down the unconscious kidnapper to help Dredion. Cursing and wiping the blood away from his bitten lip, Kamen let Rydin help him up. Kamen had lost none of his strength it seemed. Though Dredion had admittedly been too young and distracted by the death of his family and friends to notice too much the last time they met. Responding to some silent signal figures burst out of barrels and swung down from the

decks of the ships. There were over two dozen humans all as armed with magic and metal as Dredion's supporters.

Dredion prepared for a rush attack from the new fighters, but they held their place, flanking Kamen and the thief, who was setting down the rug-wrapped Starkin. Dredion saw that Kamen was staring with a bemused expression just beyond Dredion's feet. A quick look over the shoulder showed Rydin had shoved the unconscious kidnapper behind Dredion.

"She failed, again," Kamen said. "How disappointing. All the training and attention for nothing. Well, all the same, I'd like to have her back. She's got quite a bit of potential with a little fine tuning." Dredion felt the spell he had set over the girl to keep her unconscious and powerless snap under Kamen's concentration. She began to shift and groan. Dredion cursed.

"Attack," he ordered and the mages did just that, clashing with Kamen's supporters in a display of colorful light, sound and projectiles that would make a circus master drool with envy. Right now both forces were relatively even in power, but if the girl joined in the tide would roll toward Kamen. She was strong.

Dredion threw himself into the fray, with Rydin at his back, trying to fight his way toward Kamen. He sent Kestra and Lyra orders to go in from different angles.

Dredion was forced to knock several humans from his path before he could spot Kamen again. Surprisingly he had already retrieved the noblewoman and was standing over the kneeling figure. He passed her the carpet-wrapped bundle and turned. Dredion could feel him gathering his power to create a star portal. Dredion judged the power Kamen was able to gather was enough to carry them far.

Few elves could even control the amount of magic necessary for a distance so great and it was a risk, as any distance was a risk in the star fields. However, Kamen seemed confident as he wove his spell. He was being protected by the male kidnapper, who was facing off both physical and magical attacks around them.

Stop him! He cried to the others. If Kamen walked through the stars, there would be no following his trail. It was one of the best parts of the spell and now their worst enemy. Fighting with everything he had, Dredion made his way one agonizingly slow step at a time toward the escaping Kamen.

It took a minute before Satani was able to understand where she was and what was happening. The first thing she noticed, before her vision cleared, was the miasma of hostile magic in the air.

“Attack!” someone screamed and she felt that magic erupt into a full battle.

Instinctively, she reached for her magic and sighed with relief when it responded to her questing touch. She felt dizzy from where her head had struck the wall. She struggled to focus her eyes and when she looked up found she was lying on the dock. She could feel the surge of the river’s magic beneath the wooden platform she was on. There were figures fighting everywhere. A black clad king’s mage tripped over her, stumbled a few steps and started fighting what appeared to be one of Kamen’s private mages—possibly Smokey.

Satani struggled to her knees just as a familiar figure emerged through the madness in front of her. She felt a fist that had clenched around her chest release. Kamen was here and safe. In fact, he was carrying the bundle Gawin and she had gone to such

lengths to steal. Gawin was fighting off humans and other figures trying to get to Kamen. Satani tried to jump to her feet, but ended up falling back to her knees as a wave of dizziness swept over her. Kamen rolled his eyes.

“Hold this and we will leave this place to these other fools,” Kamen snapped and shrugged the bundle from his shoulder to her arms. Satani had to struggle to hold it. It was heavy, easily fifty stones or more. The carpeting also made it awkward to hold. Before she could drop it, she set it down on the ground. Satani noticed in a bemused, muddled kind of way, that there was no movement within. Was whoever wrapped inside still alive? Could they breathe with the carpet around them so tightly? Kamen was concentrating on some large magic. Satani used his distraction as an opportunity to set the bundle down and unwrap it. She rolled it over a few times to reveal what was within.

Brown curls were caught in the fabric of the carpet and covered the pale face of a child, with large and pointed ears. Satani used a shaking hand to brush the hair out of the child’s face. She looked no older than ten if Satani was a reliable judge, lanky for her age with a sharp nose and chin she’d have to spend years growing into. Satani reached down to touch her, to make sure she was breathing, but caught her breath with her hand hovering just over the child’s shoulder. There, where the nightgown had slipped down her arm, was a star. It was a sliver star embedded in the skin of her shoulder. She recognized it. It was the star sign that was on her mask, but on the child’s body it seemed as natural as her nose or fingers. It was as seamless as a birthmark with no evidence of being a tattoo or magically added decoration.

Before Satani’s shaking fingers could touch the symbol, a blow from behind caught her across the back and head, sending her tumbling over the Starkin. She

somehow managed to turn it into a controlled roll and came up in a shaky crouch next to Kamen, who was still engrossed in his escape route. Gawin was busy facing the two female elves, who were pressing him hard if his expression and the sweat on his brow was any indication. Satani felt like she was in a dream as the man she'd danced with for hours straddled the child's body, protective magic surrounding them. In his left hand he clutched a short sword, but his right was drawing a throwing dagger from somewhere near his hip.

Time might have felt slow, but the knife was not. A flick of his wrist was all it took to sent the metal spiraling toward Kamen's unprotected back. Satani's magic slipped and slid through her mental fingers unable after the last blow to fight the dizziness. Kamen didn't see it, he would be killed. Satani moved. A buzzing in her ears blocked out the sounds of the battle growing louder. With arms outstretched, she threw herself in front of Kamen. Sound returned with the thud of metal in flesh.

She would have screamed, but all the air in her chest was gone and she couldn't seem to get it back. Her knees buckled and she fell backward. Something caught her. Someone. Kamen. The world around them was mad with magic and fighting, but where they stood, with safety only a few steps away, was almost serene. All he had to do was help her through the gate, two steps and they would both be safe. He could use his magic to heal her. She opened her mouth, but no words would come. She could taste blood and felt some trickle down from the corner of her mouth and into her ear. Kamen was smiling down at her. A real, genuine smile, with no danger, hatred or anger in it. Satani responded in kind, her chin quivering, but happier in that moment to smile than she had every been in her life.

It was a short-lived moment.

Kamen's face, which she knew infinitely better than her own, wavered as if hidden behind a rippling veil. Then firmed again. His features elongated, become more angular and defined. Satani met his eyes, which, though slightly dilated did not disguise the fact that they were as feline in nature as her own. She could see the tips of pointed ears now poking out of hair that had worked loose of its pony tale.

Shocked, her breathing coming in short stuttering gasps, Satani's body started to shake, wracked by shivers. That didn't make sense, she wasn't cold. In fact, she felt hot, felt sweat dripping down her temples. Hot all over, but her body continued to shake. Kamen knelt with her, supporting her weight in his arms as he crouched closer to the ground. He lowered his face to her ear and she was transfixed by the familiar smell of mint on his breath and the warmth of it searing against her ear.

"I always knew you would be useful for something," Kamen said almost endearingly.

Satani couldn't blink as his sweet, gentle smile retreated into his normally stony expression and his grip on her relaxed. Without the support, she fell to the deck like a rag doll, her head bouncing off the dock's rough beams. She still didn't blink, even though the edges of her vision were blurring and darkening. She could feel water streaming from them as well, but couldn't cry out.

Kamen stood and turned away from her without looking back. He gave a shrill whistle before stepping through the silver slit of magic he'd created. The call for immediate retreat caused figures, several she recognized, to leap over her supine form to follow him. Including Gawin.

He did look at her. Looked at her and was still chuckling when he stepped into the light. He was the last to step through before the power and her escape winked out.

Satani was alone.

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Vita

Rebecca W. Miller was born in Bowling Green, OH, to parents Barry and Melanie Miller. She is the older of two with a younger brother, Alex. She attended Rock Spring Elementary and continued to Lafayette High School in Walker County, Georgia. After graduation she went south to Georgia College and State University where she studied creative writing with fellow students. Rebecca completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts with a concentration in Creative Writing in Spring 2010. A few months following graduation, Rebecca was hired by the Chattanooga Times Free Press in Chattanooga, Tennessee. She continues to work there as editor and writer for the Dining Out Guide. Rebecca graduated with a Masters of Arts in English Creative Writing in May 2010 from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and plans to continue her education.